UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Reaching Readers: Textual Engagement and Personalized Learning in the Works of Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer

Permalink

Author

King, Lauren

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Reaching Readers:

Textual Engagement and Personalized Learning

in the Works of Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Lauren Rebecca King

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reaching Readers:

Textual Engagement and Personalized Learning

in the Works of Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer

by

Lauren Rebecca King

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Christine N. Chism, Chair

This dissertation takes a critical look at the theories of readerly engagement and literary pedagogy that Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer articulate throughout their bodies of work, examining the ways in which they utilize these theories to develop practical strategies for cultivating readerly engagement and personalized learning in diverse new audiences of vernacular readers. The later Middle Ages in England and France bore witness to a striking expansion of vernacular literacy, as advances in education and book production made written materials more accessible beyond the clerical classes. This spread of literacy to a growing group of lay readers meant that late medieval writers were compelled to grapple with diverse new audiences containing individuals of varied social classes, genders, and educational backgrounds. I argue that de Pizan and Chaucer used

their writing to open up educational opportunities for these audiences. Recognizing that these new readers, despite their access to the written word, still faced social, cognitive, and emotional barriers to their ability to learn from literary works, these writers sought to facilitate practices of engaged reading and break down these didactic barriers.

In the first half of my dissertation, I explore de Pizan's depiction of readerly identification, arguing that she presents the experience of identifying with a literary figure as a profound facilitator of personalized learning. Having established the pedagogical benefits of identification, I move to analyzing how de Pizan encourages identification in her female readers in order to teach them practical lessons in reading and life. In the second half of this dissertation, I examine the ways in which Geoffrey Chaucer models problematic reading strategies in order to encourage a diverse body of readers to overcome their proclivities for interpretative self-sabotage. I conclude by exploring how Chaucer offers the experience of wonder as an alternative reading methodology.

A number of recent studies have focused on medieval writers' responses to an expanding vernacular readership, emphasizing writers' attempts to manage readers' interpretative authority. My own work shifts the focus from authority to access, expanding opportunities to theorize late medieval strategies of literary-educational inclusion.

The dissertation of Lauren Rebecca King is approved.

Erica M. Weaver

Zrinka Stahuljak

Rebecca Davis

Christine N. Chism, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

It's been an arduous and beautiful journey getting to this point. Along the way, I have learned, suffered, struggled, and grown more than I would have thought possible. On my own I could never have seen it through. But I had help along the way. To those who have walked with me along this path of long study, I am profoundly grateful. This dissertation is dedicated to all of you.

To Chris Chism, my exemplary mentor, for helping me to face my demons and find my voice. You've been with me from my earliest days in the graduate program, providing guidance, insight, encouragement, and inspiration. Every time I got stuck, I knew you would be there to lead me back to the path, even when the obstacles (as they so often were) were of my own making. Your compassion and good humor have sustained me through the rough patches of this project and helped me climb towards the heights. It is no exaggeration to say that I could not have made it through this dissertation, or grad school itself, without you. I am deeply grateful.

To Becky Davis, for introducing me to Chaucer all those years ago, and for your endless kindness and encouragement. You helped me to understand how I could join the scholarly conversation and believe that I had something worth saying. I've loved getting tea with you and talking about academia and about life. Thank you for your mentorship and your friendship.

To Erica Weaver, for giving me guidance as I considered both my dissertation and my future beyond graduate school. You helped me practice for my first conference and plan my path, and you always kept me honest about Boethius and Old English. Your feedback

Graduate school has indeed been a path of long study, but I have not walked it alone. To everyone who has gone on this journey with me: Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Vita

Lauren Rebecca King

Education

2018   University of California, Los Angeles
       Master of Arts, English

2013   University of California, Irvine
       Bachelor of Arts, English

Conference Presentations

"A Mirror for Princesses: The Role of Identification in the Writings of Christine de Pizan."
       Women's Voices of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Symposium. Brigham Young
       University, Provo, UT. March 2020.

Selected Teaching Experience

2021-2022   University of California, Irvine
             Lecturer, Department of English

2015-2020   University of California, Los Angeles
             Graduate Student Instructor, Department of English

Introduction

Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer might seem like an unlikely pairing in a

study of medieval authorship. [1] Although both wrote at around the same time, and both

---

[1] Indeed, there are relatively few studies directly comparing them. Among the studies that do focus primarily on a comparison of the two, a few have been highly influential, in particular Susan Schibanoff's "'Taking the Gold out of Egypt': The Art of Reading as a Woman," in which she compares the reading techniques exhibited by Chaucer's Wife of Bath to the reading techniques Christine de Pizan exhibits in her *Livre de la cité des dames*. Susan Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 83–106, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015038902394. Sheila Delany's "Rewriting Woman Good" is also a classic study of the two writers, setting de Pizan's *Cité* against Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and comparing the methods and implications of their parallel attempts to engage with the misogynist literary tradition. Sheila Delany, "Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 75–92, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010768995. While Schibanoff regards the parallels between the Wife of Bath and de Pizan positively, S. H. Rigby takes a more negative stance, arguing that in light of the views Christine de Pizan expresses in her "serious" defenses of women, in which she praises decorous conduct, Chaucer cannot have intended the Wife of Bath's speech as serious defense of women; rather, the decorous Prudence is more apt. S. H. (Stephen Henry) Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women," *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 2 (2000): 133–65, https://doi.org/10.1353/cr.2000.0024. For my part, I would argue that Christine de Pizan's writing ought not to be treated as an absolute metric against which other medieval defenses of women should be measured, especially since modern feminism admits of much variance of method and goals (and as Sheila Delany has observed, Christine de Pizan's social politics were generally on the conservative side) Sheila Delany, "'Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan," in *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987; New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 312–28. Rigby is consistent with the majority of comparative studies of these two writers, however, in evaluating the relative feminism of their works. Studies that directly place de Pizan and Chaucer side by side also tend to take the form of a direct comparison of two of their works or a comparison of the character of the Wife of Bath with de Pizan/Christine. In this vein, Theresa Coletti provides an excellent article that frames a discussion of the similarities and differences between these writers' biographies, perspectives, and priorities with a comparison of the *House of Fame* and the *Chemin*. Theresa Coletti, "Paths of Long Study: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28, no. 1 (2006): 1–40, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2006.0025. Other studies that compare de Pizan and Chaucer include: Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 35–54, 79–80, 149, 173–76, 194; Anna Slerca, "Christine de Pizan, Ceoffrey Chaucer et le thème du voyage allégorique," in *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009* (Florence: Alinea, 2013), 195–202; and Judith Laird, "Good Women and *Bonnes Dames*: Virtuous Females in Chaucer and Christine de Pizan," *The Chaucer Review* 30, no. 1 (1995): 58–70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095914. For my part, I

subsequently attained great literary and critical acclaim, a number of salient differences

distinguish their lives and works. Christine de Pizan lived in France and had patrons among

the French nobility, while Geoffrey Chaucer, across the Channel and on the opposite of the

Hundred Years' War, traveled in Ricardian circles.[2] De Pizan[3] was a woman, known for her

works written in defense of women; Chaucer was a man, whose portrayals—and personal

treatment—of women have been the subject of much critical debate.[4] Their writing careers

---

am less interested in drawing direct comparisons between individual works of these authors, and more interested in looking at broader similarities in their approaches to teaching their readers, as well as in their efforts to craft more inclusive and effective reading pedagogies.

[2] For a detailed study of the "king's affinity" and Chaucer's place within it, see: Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 24–46.

[3] Throughout this dissertation, I break with convention in referring to the historical Christine de Pizan as either "Christine de Pizan" or as "de Pizan," and referring to her Christine de Pizan's authorial persona as "Christine." While I am aware that surnames like "de Pizan" generally indicate an author's place of origin rather than an inherited family name, I am not entirely comfortable with referring to a female writer by her first name alone, especially in a study that juxtaposes her work with that of a male author. I also feel that the scholarly tendency to refer to both historical and fictional "Christines" with the same name tends to muddy the distinctions between them. In order to establish parity, then, between Geoffrey Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, as well as consistency in how I refer to them, I will be referring to the historical writers by their full names or surnames and to their authorial personae/narrators by their first names or titles ("Christine" in the works of Christine de Pizan, "the narrator" in the *Canterbury Tales*, and "Geffrey" in the *House of Fame*). In referring to Christine de Pizan in this way, I follow the example of Margaret W. Ferguson and Alexandra Verini, who refer to Christine de Pizan by her family name in part to mark her as "an agent embedded in a social world." Margaret W. Ferguson, "An Empire of Her Own: Literacy as Appropriation in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*," in *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 406n2; Alexandra Verini, "Medieval Models of Female Friendship in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 367n7, https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.2.0365.

[4] In particular, the charge of *raptus* (which could signify abduction or rape), brought against Chaucer by Cecily Chaumpaine, has forced scholars to grapple with the question of whether or not Chaucer was a rapist, and what this means forscholarship on his works. For a recent examination of the case, in light of certain overlooked historical documents, see: Sebastian Sobecki, "Wards and Widows: *Troilus and Criseyde* and New Documents on Chaucer's Life," *ELH* 86, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 413–40, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/726186.For a sampling of the *many* perspectives on Chaucer's portrayal of women, see: Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002); Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

overlapped by a few years, but hers was beginning as his was ending.[5] Writing, for her, was

both passion and profession, a means to help support herself and her family after the death

of her husband.[6] For Chaucer, making his living variably as an employee of noble and royal

households, a soldier and a diplomat, controller of the wool custom, clerk of the king's

works, deputy forester, and numerous other roles, writing was principally a passion.[7] And

these differences do generate differences in their outlooks, in their priorities, in their

---

1992), http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2s2004t2/; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[5] Geoffrey Chaucer was born around 1342 and is traditionally said to have died around the year 1400. Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 12, 495–96. Christine de Pizan was born around the year 1365, and she seems to have died sometime between 1429 (the date of her last known poem) and 1434.Françoise Autrand, *Christine de Pizan: Une femme en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 14; Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan : Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984), 204–7. Chaucer's writing career is thought to have spanned, very roughly, the years between 1368 and 1400. Larry D. Benson, "The Canon and Chronology of Chaucer's Works," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), xxix. Christine de Pizan personally dated the start of her writing career to 1399, when she completed her first book, although she seems to have begun writing poetry around 1394. Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 64–65; Willard, *Life and Works*, 43–44.

[6] Christine de Pizan has often been identified as "medieval Europe's first professional woman writer" and as "France's first woman of letters." Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 3; Willard, *Life and Works*, 15. While writing cannot have been her sole source of income between the death of her husband and the writing of her first financially successful works (there is some evidence she may have worked as a copyist during this time), once she became established, she in effect, as Autrand puts it, ran her own "atelier" for the production of editions of her books. Willard, 44–47; Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 73. Manuscript experts have identified some fifty manuscripts to have been written partly or wholly in her hand, and she personally supervised the copying, distribution, and program of illustration for the works she composed. Autrand, 73. She was very attuned to the practical and business elements of her career.

[7] Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 43–69, 101, 72–73, 113–14, 172, 240, 363, 417. While Chaucer did receive noble support or employment of one kind or another for much of his life, there is no evidence that this support was contingent on his production of poetry. Jenni Nuttall, "Patronage," in *A New Companion to Chaucer*, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 310–11. On the contrary, he seems to have generally avoided literary patronage. Nuttall, 310–16.

writing.[8]

Yet there are also a number of prominent similarities between these two writers, as well as between their works.[9] Both, for example, occupied similar social positions. Although neither was born to noble parents, they both lived and worked on the margins of an international courtly culture and relied, to a greater or lesser degree, on the favor of royals and nobles for their social and financial well-being.[10] Although they adopted different perspectives on key issues, their works share a number of topics, themes, and influences.[11] Both were passionate about literature and supplemented their early education (school for Chaucer and education at home for de Pizan) with extensive reading in adulthood.[12] And the books they read—those that had the most dramatic influence on their subsequent writing—were in many cases the same: Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, Dante's *Commedia*, and the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. Their personalized interpretations of these works profoundly shaped their thought and their

---

[8] See: Delany, "Rewriting Woman Good"; Coletti, "Paths of Long Study."

[9] For a broad overview of similarities and differences between Christine de Pizan and Chaucer, centered on a comparison of de Pizan's *Chemin de lonc estude* and Chaucer's *House of Fame*, see: Coletti, "Paths of Long Study." While there is no solid evidence that Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer actually knew of each other, or of each other's writing, their social circles touched at the edges. Both, for example, praised the work of Oton de Granson, an acquaintance of Chaucer's; both "entered into poetic communication with Eustache Deschamps," and both had connections with "the Earl of Salisbury, John Montagu, and Henry IV." Coletti, 7–8.

[10] See: Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 4; Nadia Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 15–17; Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*.

[11] Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 3–6; Delany, "Rewriting Woman Good," 75.

[12] For an overview of Chaucer's likely education, see: Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 38–41. Much of the information about Christine de Pizan's education comes from her own autobiographical writings, but for an overview, see: Willard, *Life and Works*, 33–34; Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 20–21.

literary output.[13] As a result, perhaps, of these confluences of influence, of background, of

reading, and of experience, both showed a marked interest in the way that readers produce

their own individual interpretations of the works they read.[14] And in response to an

unprecedented increase in vernacular literacy that reshaped the contours of the late

medieval literary world, both strove to facilitate their readers' own personal interpretative

efforts, in an effort to help their diverse, expanding audiences learn from their reading and

to educate themselves. It is on their efforts to reach and teach these new audiences of

readers that I focus in the present study.

The Historical Context

The historical environment that shaped Chaucer and de Pizan's literary endeavors was

marked by a progressive increase in vernacular literacy and access to books. Prior to the

twelfth century in France, literature was primarily written in Latin, and largely produced

---

[13] Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 5–6, 12.

[14] As Colletti argues:

> *The House of Fame* and the *Chemin* articulate complementary understandings of the situated reader whose responsibility it is to sort out and act on authoritative communications. Christine's commitment to sapiential and prophetic writing in the *Chemin* directs attention away from the medium of representation to focus instead on how—and by whom—messages are received and used. The poem stakes a claim for the salutary impact of learning and persuasion on individual human beings and on the capacity of speech and writing to inspire wisdom and prudence . . . Chaucer's poem scarcely invokes an analogous program for reform, yet *The House of Fame* nonetheless provides one of his most powerful statements on the capacities and limitations of the reader: the problems of its narrator-protagonist focus fundamentally on the individual's reception and interpretation of verbal messages. Whereas Chaucer emphasizes the dilemmas faced by a reader confronting written and spoken discourses unmoored from any stable authority, Christine articulates a faith in the efficacy of ethical words for the discerning recipient. Yet both writers reinforce the semiotic and epistemological labor of the interpreting subject. Coletti, 26.

and consumed in monastic and clerical contexts.[15] Beginning in the twelfth century, however, French-language literature began to proliferate more widely, as the French and Anglo-Norman nobility began to develop a lay culture of reading and book collection amongst themselves.[16] By the thirteenth century, the rise of universities and other schools led to French literacy and literature becoming increasingly accessible to an increasingly diverse lay public.[17] Aristocrats and universities began to accumulate vast libraries, sometimes containing hundreds of books.[18] Copyists and booksellers began to proliferate in university towns, responding to universities' impressive demand for materials for their students.[19] More and more activities, both personal and professional, necessitated at least a basic ability to read and write, leading to the growth of "pragmatic," and eventually more "cultured" reading practices and forms of literacy among the middle class.[20] And although books remained expensive, advances in book production, driven by the demands of universities and a bibliophilic nobility, brought prices low enough to make them, by the

---

[15] Florence Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture En France Aux XIVe et XVe Siècles: Pratiques, Poétique, Imaginaire*, Bibliothèque Du XVe Siècle 74 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 9–10; Malcolm Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," in *The Mediaeval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby, vol. 2, Literature and Western Civilization (London: Aldus Books, 1973), 555–56, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015020696905.

[16] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 10–11; Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 557.

[17] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 10–11.

[18] Bouchet, 12–13; Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000), 25–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62998-5.

[19] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 15; Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 19.

[20] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 14.

mid-fourteenth-century, accessible to certain members of the working middle class.[21] In

her study of the discourse of reading in late-medieval France, Florence Bouchet describes

the situation thus:

> Plus nombreux qu'auparavant, des individus de statuts et de capacités divers cherchent à bénéficier du livre, directement ou indirectement. Même si les œuvres continuent d'être adressés à ce destinataire privilégié qu'est le prince--car les écrivains ont besoin du soutien de quelque puissant--et circulent dans le cercle choisi des cours, il leur arrive de toucher un plus large public. Étudiants, juristes, officers d'administration, « gens de métiers », marchands et bourgeois ont désormais accès à toutes sortes d'ouvrages. Les femmes, aussi : maintes œuvres s'addressent explicitement à des lectrices autant qu'à des lecteurs."[22]

> [In greater numbers than before, individuals of varied status and abilities seek to benefit from reading, directly or indirectly. Even though books continue to be addressed to that privileged recipient, the prince—for writers need the support of the powerful—and to circulate in the select circle of the court, they sometimes reach a wider audience. Students, lawyers, administrative officers, "tradespeople," merchants, and bourgeois now have access to all sorts of works. Women, too: many works are explicitly addressed to female readers as well as male readers.][23]

As Malcolm Parkes puts it in his influential study of late-medieval lay literacy: "Increasing

demand, better-organized production, cheaper handwriting, and the introduction of paper

led in the long run to cheaper books . . . Books were always a luxury in the Middle Ages, but

the production of cheaper books meant that they could become a luxury for poorer

people."[24]

---

[21] Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 564; Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 19, 27–29.

[22] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 11.

[23] All translations in this study are mine unless otherwise noted. When I make use of a published translation, I will cite the translator. Quotations from published translations will be placed entirely in quotation marks within the brackets that mark translations. Translations that are my own will not be surrounded by quotation marks, although they may contain quotation marks within them, if these are present in the original.

[24] Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 564.

Many of the same processes were taking place in England, albeit along a somewhat

different timeline, for England's vernacular literary tradition experienced an earlier boom.

From the late seventh to the ninth century, literacy in both Latin and Old English was

considered essential for the English clerical classes, although as in France, Latin was the

dominant language of written literature.[25] In the ninth century, however, repeated Viking

invasions laid waste to England's educational system and struck a heavy blow to literacy.[26]

In his efforts to rectify the shattered state of English learning, King Alfred instituted an

ambitious educational program aimed at the promotion of literacy in Old English, an

essential part of which involved the translation of Latin texts into the English vernacular.[27]

These reforms kickstarted the gradual recovery of the English educational system,

encouraged the development of Old English prose writing, and contributed to somewhat of

an increase in lay vernacular literacy, at least among the ruling classes and those of the

legal profession.[28] Following the Benedictine Reforms, the late tenth and early eleventh

centuries saw a dramatic increase in the production of vernacular English prose works,

---

[25] Mechthild Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 281; Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, October 26, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.66.

[26] O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture."

[27] Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 281–83; O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture."

[28] O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture"; Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 281–82.

which added to an already robust Old English manuscript corpus.[29]

This rise was hindered by the Norman Conquest, which had consequences for the production of vernacular English texts, due in part to the emergence of Anglo-Norman as a competing literary language.[30] Despite these setbacks, Old English (and, as the language transformed, Middle English) manuscripts continued to be produced, albeit in reduced numbers, throughout the twelfth century.[31] And by the fourteenth century, vernacular manuscript production in English began, once more, to dramatically increase.[32] As Nicholas Watson observes, between the years of 1300 and 1420:

> . . . written English texts of all kinds . . . appeared in far greater quantities than previously, gathering to themselves a new sense of their importance and undergoing a degree of standardization, as writers tried both to articulate their growing consciousness of the distinctiveness and coherence of English language and culture and to give the language a status closer to that of French or Latin.[33]

As in France, aristocratic interest in book collecting, the rise of universities and public schools, and a growing private book trade meant that English-language books were in

---

[29] Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 287; O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture."

[30] See Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 287–88; Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020-1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91–98, 123–24.

[31] Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 287–88; Treharne, *Living Through Conquest*, 122–28. As Treharne convincingly argues in her excellent study of English textual production between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, however, the consequences of the Norman Conquest on the production of English manuscripts has traditionally been exaggerated. Treharne, 98–102.

[32] Gretsch, "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular," 287–88; Nicholas Watson, "The Politics of Middle English Writing," in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 332, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

[33] Watson, "The Politics of Middle English Writing," 333.

much greater supply.[34] And as in France, readers beyond the clerical class began to acquire them. As Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. discuss:

> Lay book owners included the aristocracy and upper and lower gentry, squires, courtiers, lawyers, administrators and men of affairs, military leaders, wealthy merchants and their wives, students, well-off urban artisans, and at least a few urban and rural laborers. By the fifteenth century the readership of works in the English vernacular was made up of an increasingly broad spectrum of social groups."[35]

The proliferation of books and expansion of education occurred in tandem with an increase in Middle English literacy that was was centered on lay populations: "concentrated among the mercantile, gentry, and noble classes for whom literacy and literary engagement marked opportunities for developing social prestige."[36] In particular, the English middle class saw steady gains in literacy throughout the late Middle Ages.[37]

Absolute literacy rates still remained low: in late-medieval England, as Heather Blatt observes: "Conservative estimates suggest perhaps as little as 5 per cent of the overall population could read." "In urban locations," however, as she notes: "perhaps as much as 50 per cent of the male population could read English."[38] The proximity of literate, and

---

[34] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 19–34; Andrew Taylor, "Authors, Scribes, Patrons, and Books," in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 355, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

[35] Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 112, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

[36] Heather Blatt, *Participatory Reading in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3zp01n.

[37] Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 557.

[38] Blatt, *Participatory Reading*, 9.

potentially book-owning, individuals meant that even those who could not read the written

word had a greater opportunity to engage in aural reading experiences. Expensive books

and low rates of literacy meant that "Lay access to books was often indirect," and laypeople

"often heard books read aloud or paraphrased."[39] But the fact that reading was most often

performed in a social context during this time, with one individual reading aloud to others,

meant that there was little to no stigma on encountering books in this way.[40] Indeed, "in a

world in which most reading still took place aloud in groups . . . hearing books was often

preferred to reading them oneself, even by the highly literate."[41] The proliferation of books

and readers thus opened up opportunities for exposure to written works beyond those

[39] Taylor, "Authors, Scribes, Patrons, and Books," 356.

[40] For an extensive discussion of the popularity of public reading during this period, see: Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Encounters with texts took a variety of forms during this period: one could organize medieval reading practices based on a number of combinations of modalities, based on whether the reader was alone or in company, reading aloud or silently, or recalling, reciting, or hearing a remembered text. Coleman, 42. Because of the number of modalities within which texts might be encountered, as well as the possibility that a reading audience might, at different times, silently read or hear the same text, I choose to use terms such as "reading" and "readers" throughout this study to encompass both private and public, as well as both aural and visual, readers. I am aware that the affordances and experiences of reading in these different modes would not be the same, but both de Pizan and (to a lesser extent) Chaucer implicitly or explicitly address both aural and visual readers throughout their bodies of work, and they seem to have been writing with the understanding that their audiences' modes of encountering their texts might vary. See, for example: Deborah McGrady, "Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and Her Readers," in *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 167–73; Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, 150–52 (although Coleman is emphatic that Chaucer would have imagined an audience predominately composed of hearers). In terms of these writers' ideal audiences, Christine de Pizan seems to have shown a preference for a hybrid audience of private, silent readers who would then discuss her works in small groups, whereas Chaucer tends more often to address an audience of hearers in his own works, although he describes his narrative personas as reading silently and solitarily, and does recommend the reading of *other* writers' works to his readers. McGrady, "Reading for Authority," 168, 172–73; Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, 148–55, 169–70.

[41] Taylor, "Authors, Scribes, Patrons, and Books," 356.

who were conventionally "literate." Indeed, the social variety amongst readers of written

English was paralleled by the diversity of the audiences who "were listening to English

texts read aloud" as part of "the broad and immensely socially varied "audiate" culture that

lay behind many such Middle English texts."[42] And the possibilities for public reading were

similar in France.[43] Literature and literacy were no longer the exclusive province of the

Church or of the highly educated. Greater number of readers began to explore the potential

of literature, both secular and religious, to provide them with moral and intellectual

improvement, social advancement, and pleasure.[44] Taken together, this body of readers

and listeners constituted a new and vastly expanded reading audience. And this more

diverse audience—diverse in background, in educational experience, in gender—carried

with them a new set of expectations for what literature could do, along with a variety of

idiosyncratic strategies for making meaning of it, as writers of the time were well aware.

Institutionally sanctioned practices of textual interpretation were certainly present

and prominent during this period. Universities and monasteries had their own practices of

reading: formal, venerable, codified, systematic, based on the interpretation of Latin texts,

and instilled in students as they were drilled in the works of the classical *auctores* from

grammar school onward.[45] But there was no guarantee that the "new" reader would have

---

[42] Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 114.

[43] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 24–36; Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, 109–47.

[44] Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 562, 565; Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 54, 57–59, 64, 211; Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 25–31.

[45] For an overview of late-Medieval scholastic literary theory and interpretative practices, see: Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014716354. See also: Rita Copeland,

been trained in these techniques of reading. As Laurel Amtower notes: "Readers of vernacular texts and contemporary English writing were, in general, not fluent in Latin. Comprised of the gentry, merchants, lawyers, and artisans, these lay readers might not receive formal instruction in the academic reception of *auctoritas*."[46] Possessing a range of reading skills and experiences, these readers could apply a range of unpredictable interpretative approaches to the texts they encountered. The result was that writers were faced with an audience, both present and future, whose contours were potentially unknowable, and each of whose members might react in a personal and idiosyncratic manner to the text and to the experience of reading it.

For their part, writers were intensely aware of the contingencies of this new audience. Observing trends in the exemplary literature of late-medieval England, Elizabeth Allen notes that: "In the later Middle Ages, texts exhibit an increasing attention to widening audiences, understood as not only resistant or dissenting but potentially idiosyncratic and unrepresentable."[47] Bouchet testifies similarly: "Les prologues et épilogues, lieux par excellence de la parole auctoriale . . . témoignent abondamment de préoccupations

---

"Medieval Theory and Criticism," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Krieswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.49015003006070; Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a summary of two influential twelfth-century efforts to educate lay readers in monastic and scholastic reading practices that also serves as an efficient overview of these practices, see: Deborah McGrady, *Controlling Readers: Guillaume de Machaut and His Late Medieval Audience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 24–32.

[46] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 121. Heather Blatt likewise notes that: "the growing audience of vernacular readers in this period evidences eagerness for new works, and eagerness for instruction, while not sharing in the formal training and sophisticated Latinate practices writers themselves possessed." Blatt, *Participatory Reading*, 9.

[47] Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 8.

nouvelles a l'égard de lecteurs aux attentes et aux capacités diverses" [Prologues and epilogues, sites par excellence of authorial speech . . . abundantly testify to new concerns about readers of diverse expectations and abilities].[48] Writers were aware that they were addressing a significantly broader audience. And in response to this expanded audience, these writers began to change the way they thought about, wrote about, and sought to reach and to teach their readers.

A key element of this change was the growing expectation that readers were going to actively engage with texts in a varied manner. In the introduction to her study of participatory late-medieval reading practices, Heather Blatt observes that "the way that late-medieval writers anticipate, depict, model, and shape reader participation demonstrates a developing understanding of readers as participants, and a growing reliance upon and expectation of their participation—in other words, a literary culture focused on ways to make readers work."[49] Allen makes a similar observation, noting that "In a context of increasingly varied literate practices, audience initiative is so often encouraged, portrayed, and corrected in scenarios of teaching and interpretation that it becomes a defining feature of the exemplary mode."[50] Bouchet argues that the word "*Acteur*" [actor], which generally applied, at the time, to the author, "pourrait aussi s'appliquer au lecteur, en tant qu'usager actif du livre, intellectuellement et affectivement investi vis-à-vis d'un objet culturel dont il ne saurait être seulement le consommateur passif." [could also apply to the reader, as an active user of the book, intellectually and

---

[48] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 21.

[49] Blatt, *Participatory Reading*, 6.

[50] Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 18.

14

emotionally invested in a cultural object of which he could not be merely the passive consumer].[51] "Increasingly called upon to expound on the text, to interpret its significance, and to take from it moral and ethical lessons," lay readers of the period were granted new forms of agency.[52]

This expectation of audience initiative also provided challenges, however, for writers interested in teaching their readers—as, in practice, many had to be. It is a critical commonplace that medieval literature displays a preoccupation with didacticism. As Bouchet puts it:

> . . . la littérature pourrait passer pour futile si elle ne prétendait qu'à l'agrément du lecteur ; c'est plus fondamentalement le progrès moral de ce dernier qu'elle ambitionne. De fait, le plaisir suscité par la lecture est assez rarement dissocié du profit intellectuel et surtout moral qu'elle apporte . . .[53]

> [Literature could seem futile if it only aimed towards the reader's pleasure; it is more fundamentally the latter's moral progress that it seeks. In fact, the pleasure aroused by reading is quite rarely dissociated from the intellectual, and above all moral, profit it provides.]

In order to justify its value, a work generally had to profess to provide some kind of moral, intellectual, practical, or spiritual benefit to its readers.[54] And readers, for their part,

---

[51] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 212.

[52] McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 7.

[53] Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 64.

[54] Literature, of course, was considered capable of both pleasing and instructing. The famous Horatian formula: "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae" ["Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life"] was well known in the Middle Ages. Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and* Ars Poetica, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 478–79, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015004940196; Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 20–21. Indeed, as Glending Olson has argued, medieval writers devised a number of justifications for the pleasure of reading. Olson, 9–10. That being said, it was common for works to evoke their own moral or pragmatic utility, as

appeared to desire these benefits. In his influential analysis of the rise of literacy in the

Middle Ages, Malcolm B. Parkes notes that the non-professional texts that middle class

vernacular readers took an interest in could be roughly divided into "two categories: those

for edification and profit, and those for edification and delight."[55] Indeed, as Laurel

Amtower argues: "Medieval readers were pragmatic in their reading selections but also

optimistic; their materials reflect a desire for upward mobility through their very

didacticism."[56] Reading and profiting from literature offered the potential for social

mobility, for personal growth, and for progress towards salvation, all goals with a profound

appeal, particularly to a rising middle class.[57] If vernacular writers expected their readers

to read actively, then vernacular readers expected that the texts they read would teach

them something worthwhile.

The same teaching strategies that would work on a monastic audience, however,

might not work on an audience of nobles, lawyers, artisans, or merchants. Didactic

literature in some ways depends on a kind of scripting of audience response; readers

encounter a text, understand it in the way it is meant to be understood, and apply its

meaning appropriately. If there is no guarantee that a reader will understand how to

engage in allegoresis, how to follow the fourfold method of scriptural exegesis, how to

---

"since profit was always more respectable than pleasure in the Middle Ages, a work that could lay claim to moral purpose would naturally do so, perhaps to the neglect of claims to please." Olson, 37.

[55] Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 565.

[56] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 31.

[57] Amtower, 27, 31, 43.

properly transition from *lectio* to *meditatio* (to *oratio*, to *operatio*, to *contemplatio*),[58] then it falls upon the writer to either instruct the reader in these techniques or to seek for other ways to reach, and to teach them.

Writers responded to this task variously. Some sought to instruct vernacular readers in forms of "official" textual interpretation which they could then apply in their readings of other texts.[59] Some strove with their readers for power over the text, striving to control their reading practices or tamp down on conflicting interpretations.[60] Some strove to shape readers' personal, affective, and aesthetic experience of reading, so that their audience might have a particular kind of reading response.[61] And some, embracing the idea that readers were going to approach texts in their own individual fashions, sought to acknowledge, encourage, facilitate, and influence these readers' practices of personalized interpretation, with the goal of teaching them to become better readers and better learners.[62]

Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer were two such writers.[63] Writing in the

---

[58] The progression between these five steps of reading is outlined in Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, although he only recommends performing the first two steps when interpreting secular literature. McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 25.

[59] McGrady, 25.

[60] Blatt, *Participatory Reading*, 10; McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 12, 44, 74.

[61] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 3–5.

[62] In practice, many writers strove to accomplish all of these goals to varying degrees.

[63] Throughout this study, I use "writers" rather than "authors" to refer to Geoffrey Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, as during the period in which they wrote, the term "author"/"*auctor*" had strong connotations of antiquity, authority, and often Latinity. As Alastair Minnis puts it: "The term *auctor* may profitably be regarded as an accolade bestowed upon a popular writer by those later scholars and writers who used extracts from his works as sententious statements or *auctoritates*, gave lectures on his works in the form of textual commentaries, or employed them as literary models."

midst of these profound shifts in the culture of literacy, both used their works to theorize

and explore the ways that readers experience and make meaning of texts. And by applying

these theories to their own writing, they sought to guide their diverse real and imagined

audiences in the process of turning their reading experiences into personally valuable (and

potentially empowering) experiences of learning. Indeed, although de Pizan and Chaucer

are thought to have primarily written for small, "privileged" audiences—in de Pizan's case,

members of the French ruling class, and in Chaucer's case, a combination of social peers

and aspirational noble readers[64]—both writers also imagine, and sometimes explicitly

address, a much broader audience for their works: one that includes, and even centers,

readers who by virtue of gender, education, or class, might historically have been

marginalized within, or excluded from, various literate communities.

Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 10. Neither Christine de Pizan nor Geoffrey Chaucer referred to themselves as authors, nor would it have been considered appropriate for them to do so, although both would eventually be regarded as authors (both writers and authorities) after their deaths.

[64] Christine de Pizan relied on royal and noble patronage to support her writing career, dedicating and gifting copies of her works to current or prospective patrons, and writing works on commission for others. Most of her patrons came from the French monarchy and nobility, as evidenced by the dedications of her works, the location of her manuscripts in her patrons' collections, and records of gifts and payments made to her for her writing. Notable patrons include King Charles VI; Isabeau of Bavaria, queen of France; John, Duke of Berry (Jean de Berry); Jean's daughter, Marie (de Berry), and her husband John I, Duke of Bourbon (Jean de Bourbon); Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (Philippe le Hardi), John the Fearless (Jean sans Peur) (and his siblings!); and Louis, duke of Orleans (Louis d'Orléans). Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*, 15–17. Geoffrey Chaucer, for his part, was once considered to be principally a court poet, although the work of scholars such as Paul Strohm has shifted the scholarly consensus towards the idea that Chaucer wrote primarily for a core audience of "social equals and near-equals," "consisting of gentle civil servants and a few Londoners," who likewise were members of the King's affinity. For a fuller treatment of Chaucer's audiences and a summary of some of the evidence for Chaucer as court-poet or Chaucer as coterie-poet, see: Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 47–83, 203n13, 204n14.

De Pizan, Chaucer, and their Audiences

In the case of Christine de Pizan, this audience of marginalized readers is an audience of women, of every class. Long considered a proto-feminist, in no small part because of her passionate defense of women against the tradition of literary misogyny in the *Livre de la cité des dames* [Book of the City of Ladies], de Pizan was deeply interested in helping women to better their lives within the restrictive social structures that governed them.[65] The way she sought to accomplish this goal was through education. In the *Cité des dames*, she strives to teach women how to recognize their own capacity for virtue, reworking old narratives to reflect a more positive perspective on womankind.[66] And in the sequel to this work, the *Livre des trois vertus* [Book of the Three Virtues], she provides a guide to social and moral conduct for women from every class of society, from princesses to prostitutes.[67]

---

[65] While Sheila Delaney infamously pushed back against the classification of Christine de Pizan as a feminist, the general scholarly consensus has been to consider de Pizan's aims as pro-woman, anti-misogynist, and proto-feminist in spirit, if not consistent with the modern feminist push for systemic change or full social equality of men and women. Delany, "'Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan." For some brief discussions of the question of Christine de Pizan's feminism, see: Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–6; Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*, 1–10; Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*, 59.

[66] For selected perspectives on Christine de Pizan's reworking of her sources, see: Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*; Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Christine de Pizan and the Misogynistic Tradition," in *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 297–311; Allyson Carr, *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change*, PDF (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 27–90.

[67] I tend to use "class" rather than "estate" as a catch-all term to refer to social categories in this study, although Christine de Pizan prefers "estate." Both terms are somewhat limited in terms of their ability to convey exactly how Christine de Pizan envisions the social categories into which women may be divided. Her classifications cover not only differences in wealth and rank, or between traditional social estates, but also differences in marital status, age, and profession. In treating "class" as a generic term, I recognize its necessary insufficiency. On the unprecedented variety of the social categories into which Christine de Pizan divides women in the *Trois vertus*, see:

Indeed, despite her intimate knowledge of the expense of acquiring books and her pragmatic focus on currying aristocratic favor, de Pizan nonetheless imagined her works reaching a much wider audience of women, if not in the present, then in the distant future. Throughout the *Cité des dames* and the *Trois vertus*, she states repeatedly that her works are intended for all women, of whatever class they may be.[68] Beginning by welcoming princesses to the allegorical city at the center of the *Cité des dames*, she works her way outwards from this exalted center, assuring her readers that her city is open to:

> Tres redoubtees et excellens princepes honnourees de France et de tout paÿs, et toutes dames, damoyselles, et generaument toutes femmes qui amastes, amez et améres vertus et bonnes meurs, tant celles qui sont trespassees comme les presentes et celles a avenir"[69]

> [Most revered, excellent, and esteemed princesses of France and of all countries, and to all ladies, maidens, and generally all women who loved, love, and will love virtue and good conduct—those of the past just as much as those of the present and those of the future]

Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, "*Le Livre des Trois Vertus* et le *sermo ad status*," in *Une femme de lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. Liliane Dulac and Bernard Ribémont, Medievalia "Etudes christiniennes" 16 (Orléans: Paradigme, 1995), 139–49.

[68] When discussing the audience of the *Livre de la cité des dames*, Wogan-Browne et al. state: "In practice, de Pizan's original was written for a small circle of courtly *litterati*, some of them the aristocratic and royal women for whom she made presentation copies like the one owned by Isabel. In theory, however, the work aims to reach all women. The structure the of book's sequel, *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, makes this universal appeal more explicit: it is a set of addresses to women from each social class." Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 305.

[69] Christine de Pizan, "*The Livre de la cité des dames* of Christine de Pisan : a critical edition," ed. Maureen Cheney Curnow, vol. 2 (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975), 2.69, p. 970.
After the first citation, all subsequent citations of the Middle French editions of de Pizan's works will be given in in the following forms:
Livre de la cité des dames: *Cité*, part.chapter, page number
Livre des trois vertus: *Trois vertus*, part.chapter, page number
Livre de la chemin de long estude: *Chemin*, line number
Livre de paix: *Paix*, part.chapter, page number
Livre de la mutacion de fortune: *Mutacion*, part.chapter.line number
Le livre de l'advision Cristine: *Advision*, part.chapter, page number.

In the opening of the *Trois Vertus*, she follows a similar pattern, beginning by addressing

advice to princesses and working her way down the social ladder. But despite this

emphasis on royal readers, necessitated by the fact that the work was dedicated to a young

princess, de Pizan does not allow women of other social classes to forget that this work is

for them as well.[70] Outlining the contours of her work in its opening section, she addresses

herself to "tout le colliege femenin," [all of the feminine community/college], assuring them

that her book is meant for "tous les estaz des femmes afin que la discipline de nostre escole

puisse estre a tous valable" [every estate of women, so that the curriculum of our school

may be valuable to all].[71] In the middle of the work, she makes it clear that the lessons in

virtue she directs towards princesses "puet a chascune femme apertenir, de quelque estat

que elle soit" [can pertain to each woman, of whatever estate she is].[72] And in the

conclusion of her work, she expresses her hope that her work will be useful to "toute

l'université des femmes" [the whole universe/university of women], "presens et a venir, la

ou se pourroit ceste dicte oeuvre estendre et estre veue"[73] ["present and future, wherever

this book can reach and be seen."].[74] The only limit on her audience, as she imagines it, is

---

[70] The original dedicatee of the work was Marguerite de Bourgogne, the recently-married dauphine of France, who was eleven at the time. Charity Cannon Willard, "Introduction to *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*," in *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1989), xii.

[71] Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre Des Trois Vertus*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1989), 1.1, p. 9.

[72] *Trois vertus*, 3.1, p. 171-2.

[73] *Trois vertus*, 3.14, p. 225.

[74] Sarah Lawson, trans., *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*, Revised Edition, by Christine de Pizan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 167.

her readers' ability to access her book.

This is not a meaningless limit, as de Pizan was well aware. As Thérèse Lorcin puts it: "Christine ne se fait guère d'illusions sur l'audience qu'elle peut avoir auprès des catégories les plus humbles. « ... se l'aventure s'i adonne que elle l'oye », dit-elle à propos des femmes de fole vie" [Christine has few illusions about the audience she can have amongst [women of] the humblest categories. ". . . if by chance they happen to hear it," she says of the prostitutes].[75] Book ownership remained out of reach for the vast majority of women, and their ability to hear works read out loud would have depended greatly on the membership of their social circles. De Pizan's desire for a universal audience is inevitably a form of fantasy. Nonetheless, in key places in the *Trois vertus*, she imagines a system of transmission whereby, even if less-advantaged readers may not access her books directly, they may learn from them indirectly, as upper-class readers embody their principles and display them for the emulation of the common people.[76] And in addition to this admittedly fairly abstract method of transmission, she also develops a detailed and pragmatic plan to

---

After the first citation, all subsequent citations of published translations of de Pizan's works will be given in in the following forms:
The Book of the City of Ladies: Brown-Grant, trans., *City of Ladies*, page number.
The Treasure of the City of Ladies (3 virtues): Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, page number.
The Book of the Path of Long Learning: Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, line number.
The Book of Peace: Green et al., trans., *Peace*, page number.
The Book of the Mutability of Fortune: Smith, trans., *Mutability*, page number.
The Vision of Christine de Pizan: McLeod and Willard, trans., *Vision*, page number.

[75] Lorcin, "*sermo ad status*," 142.

[76] For Christine de Pizan's discussion of this form of indirect dissemination, see: *Trois vertus*, 1.9, p. 9; 1.27, p. 111; and 1.10, pp. 38-9. For critical discussion of this topic, see: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 179–80; and Jean-Claude Mühlethaler, "'Traictier de vertu au profit d'ordre de vivre': relire l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan à la lumière des miroirs des princes," in *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, ed. Angus J. Kennedy et al., vol. 2 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), 592, 594, 596.

ensure that her books will be disseminated as widely as possible, so that they may fall into

many future hands. Immediately after stating that her work will benefit all of the women

that her work can "reach," she states:

> . . . me pensay que ceste oeuvre multiplieroye par le monde en plusieurs copies, quel
> qu'un fust le coust: seroit presentee en divers lieux a roynes, a princepces et haultes
> dames, | afin que plus fust honnouree et exaucee, si que elle en est digne, et que elles
> peust estre semmee entre les autres femmes; laquelle dicte pensee et desir mis a
> effect, si que ja est entrepris, sera ventillee, espandue et publiee en tous païs, —tout
> soit elle en langue françoise. Mais parce que la dicte langue plus est commune par
> l'univers monde que quelconques autre, ne demourra pas pour tant vague et non
> utile nostre dicte oeuvre, qui durera au siecle sanz decheement par diverses copies.
> Si la verront et orront maintes vaillans dames et femmes d'auctorité ou temps
> present et en cil a venir . . .[77]
>
> ["I . . . thought to myself that I would distribute many copies of this work throughout
> the world whatever the cost, and it would be presented in various places to queens,
> princesses, and great ladies, so that it might be more honored and exalted, for it is
> worthy of it, and it might be spread among other women. This idea would ensure its
> being issued and circulated in all countries. As it is in the French tongue and as that
> language is more common throughout the world than any other, this work will not
> remain useless and forgotten. It will endure in many copies all over the world
> without falling into disuse, and many valiant ladies and women of authority will see
> and hear it now and in time to come."][78]

Not satisfied with gesturing towards the possibility that a diverse group of women might

someday encounter her writing, she takes steps to ensure that this happens: transmitting

her work not only to its dedicatee but to other women who will be capable of disseminating

it. To this end, she attributes her choice to write in French, marking it as a widespread and

accessible vernacular, and thus a language that the women of the future will be likely to

understand. And she chooses to have multiple copies made of her work, in an effort to

---

[77] *Trois vertus*, 3.14, p. 225.

[78] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 167-168.

enhance its distribution.[79] From within her circumscribed sphere of influence, Christine de Pizan dreams of a global audience. And in anticipation of this larger audience, both present and future, she works to help a diverse range of women learn from her works: both lessons in reading and lessons in life.

Chaucer's actual audience is more difficult to determine, as he wrote for patrons much less frequently, if at all.[80] Two principal audiences have generally been attributed to him: a courtly and royal audience, and a "coterie" audience consisting of men and women (primarily men) roughly equal to him in status or just to one side or the other of the social scale, in particular the "lesser gentry—the knights, esquires, and women of equivalent rank, and especially those closely connected with the court," in whose social circles Chaucer would have traveled.[81] This latter view of Chaucer's primary, historical, or "actual" audience (as opposed to his "fictional," "implied," or "intended" audience)[82] has become

---

[79] Although only two original manuscript copies of the work exist today, Christine de Pizan is known to have presented copies to at least two other recipients, Marguerite de Bourgogne and Antoine, Duke of Brabant and Limbourg. Gilbert Ouy, Christine Reno, and Inès Villela-Petit, *Album Christine de Pizan*, ed. Olivier Delsaux and Tania Van Hemelryck (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 609. Furthermore, as the authors of the *Album Christine de Pizan* note, "le seul fait qu'il subsiste de ce texte une vingtaine de copies non originales semble indiquer qu'il avait dû être assez largement diffusé par l'auteur" [the mere fact that some twenty non-original copies of this text remain seems to indicate that it must have been distributed fairly widely by the author]. Ouy, Reno, and Villela-Petit, 609. The implication is that Christine de Pizan earnestly pursued her goal of seeing the work widely disseminated.

[80] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 204n14; Nuttall, "Patronage," 310–16.

[81] Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience," *Literature and History* 5 (Spring 1977): 29, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1303914505/citation/BBE23B801D08444APQ/1; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 204n14.

[82] I draw these terms from Paul Strohm's article "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," in which he outlines various kinds of audiences to which Chaucer addressed his works. Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 137–45, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093871.

commonly accepted, although as Strohm notes, this was certainly not the only social group from which Chaucer drew his readers.[83] Recent studies, however, in particular Marion Turner's 2019 biography of Chaucer, have suggested that this historical audience may have been broader than previously acknowledged. In her discussion of Chaucer's audience, Turner notes that the first recorded owner of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (in 1394) was a man named Thomas Spencer, a scribe, hostler, and brothel-keeper who lived for a time in Southwark. She connects this observation with the fact that the first recorded owner of the *Canterbury Tales* was a man named John Brynchele, who shared Spencer's professions and was likewise connected with Southwark. To this she adds the fact that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tale*s begins in a Southwark inn and prominently features this inn's owner, a man named Harry Bailly, who shares his name with a real innkeeper acquainted with both of the aforementioned book-owners.[84] The implication, as Turner argues, is that Chaucer's works were likely to have circulated, or been circulated by Chaucer, in profoundly socially mixed environments such as the inns owned by Brynchele, Spencer, and Bailly.[85] Chaucer, then, might have had reason to expect, and to reach out to, a diverse and unpredictable audience.

Regardless of the contours of his historical audience, within the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer vividly imagines a vibrant ecology of textual exchange: of imagined venues of literary access not limited to a noble or a clerical class. In the case of the Wife of Bath, texts begin in the hands of church authorities and in the book collection of her clerkly fifth

---

[83] Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience," 29; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 51.
[84] Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 397, 401, 403.

[85] Turner, 403–5.

husband, but as these texts are read to her and inscribed upon her memory, they become

hers to interpret, to modify, and to distribute as she pleases.[86] A similar phenomenon

occurs on the macro-level in the pilgrimage as a whole, as each pilgrim, regardless of social

class or level of literacy, ends the journey with a veritable library of heard and remembered

texts to think through. And as the intertextual relationships between the tales make clear,

the stories that the pilgrims hear *do* inform the tales they tell and the meanings they make

of them. Jankyn reads selections from a book to Alisoun of Bath, who shares stories from

the book of her memory, and these stories are then made available to every pilgrim in the

company, their echoes finding their way into the Clerk's Epilogue and Envoy and the

linguistic patterns and topic of the *Merchant's Tale*.[87] The Pardoner shares tales with

listeners in the towns where he preaches. The Miller takes elements of the Knight's

romance and modifies them to suit his purposes. In the tale of *Melibee*, the learnèd

Chaucer-Pilgrim-Narrator presents the company with a veritable library of source-

citations, as does the Nun's Priest in his tale.[88] The picture that emerges is of an

---

[86] A number of scholars have commented on the status the Wife of Bath's fifth husband Jankyn, and his Book of Wicked Wives, as the Wife of Bath's source for much of her material. See, for example: H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 72, 129–39, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1525/9780520341241/html.

[87] This is part of the reason that Chaucer scholars have traditionally assigned these tales to a "marriage group" within the *Canterbury Tales*, the larger reason being their shared topic of marriage. The originator of the idea of a marriage group is George Lyman Kittredge, who proposed it in: "The House of Fame," in *Chaucer and His Poetry* (1915; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 73–107, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015009013700.

[88] Leading many readers, as Peter W. Travis observes, to regard the latter as a kind of "mock-*summa*, a miniaturized synopticon of Western learning, as it knowingly appropriates to its own purposes all kinds of biblical, classical, and medieval tropes, topics, and texts beginning historically with the first book of Genesis and the fall of Troy." Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 13.

environment in which narratives circulate beyond the books that hold them—in which an

audience accustomed to hearing books read and hearing tales told is content to read with

their ears if physical texts are not available. In this last and most ambitious of his works,

Chaucer pictures, albeit in an incomplete fashion, a diverse audience united by the

existence of stories in the vernacular which they may read and make meaning of.[89]

Indeed, in a recent analysis of the events that gave rise to the *Canterbury Tales*, Paul

Strohm perceives in Chaucer's fictional pilgrim audience a vision of an expanded audience

of real readers. As he argues: "this expansively imagined Pilgrim band may be taken as an

emblem of Chaucer's growing ambition for an enlarged literary public—not as an exact

blueprint for that public but as a measure of his increasingly inclusive ambitions."[90] Noting

contemporary advances in vernacular English literacy, in papermaking, and in manuscript

production, Strohm concludes that:

> This cluster of coordinate developments could not have failed to influence Chaucer's
> view of the kind of audience he might seek and the means by which he might
> address it. Present here are the preconditions for the creation of a new kind of
> audience, an audience with freer access to books and less restricted in its ways of
> interpreting and enjoying them. These developments were spurs and incentives to a
> new idea, that of an enlarged reading public, a diverse cross section of English
> society devoted to letters and avid for tale telling, and particularly receptive to

---

[89] Indeed, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. argue, the very choice to write in the vernacular can imply a kind of openness and comprehensibility for a wide range of readers. As they put it, although English was often associated with a certain crudeness compared to Latin, "it is also the "mother" or "kynde [natural] tongue" . . . a language with immediate access to people's feelings and easily comprehensible—as Latin is not, even to those who can understand it. Writing in English can thus do rather more than provide a practical vernacular means of access to knowledge; it can signify clarity and open access and do so even in texts whose projected audience is relatively narrow." Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 325. The same, I would argue, is true for vernacular French.

[90] Paul Strohm, *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2014), 230.

books written in the English tongue.[91]

Whether real or imagined, it is to this varied and vibrant group of readers that Chaucer directs his educational efforts in the *Canterbury Tales*—and, potentially, in his earlier works as well.

Educational Endeavors

Both writers, then, wrote some of the principal works in their corpus with an audience in mind that was far more diverse and far less privileged, in a variety of ways, than the traditional audiences of literary texts. And in reaching out to this audience, imagining ways of writing that might edify these readers, both Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer display an awareness not only of these readers' expanded opportunities for access to literature but also the profound barriers that might hinder their ability to learn from and make use of it.

Christine de Pizan's awareness of these barriers is vividly visible in the opening of the *Cité des dames*. As the work begins, we see de Pizan's authorial persona, Christine, sitting in her study, reading, as is her habitual practice and her passion.[92] Happening upon a work by Matheolus, which she had been led to believe praised women, she decides to read it, but after skimming the text, she quickly discovers that the work is, in fact, virulently misogynistic.[93] This experience forcibly calls to her mind the vast literary tradition of misogynist writing, and the contemplation of this tradition places her in such a state of

[91] Strohm, 249.
[92] *Cité*, 1.1, p. 616.

[93] *Cité*, 1.1, pp. 616-617.

confusion and despair that she cannot continue her reading.[94]

Although women like Christine were increasingly gaining access to the "field of letters,"[95] what we see in this encounter is the domination of this field by a literature that has the potential to be profoundly hostile to female readers. Borne down by the weight of antifeminist tradition, Christine is forced to temporarily abandon her studies. It is only after a visionary encounter reminds her of her humanity and her goodness that she is able to find her way back onto the field where she will build her literary city.[96] Reading and learning is figured in her works as a form of access, access that can be denied by affective barriers that push readers to forget who they are.[97] And so in order to teach the women in her audience, to help them into this field of promise and danger, she strives to write works in which a diverse group of female readers may recognize themselves. Theorizing that the most effective learning happens when a reader identifies with the works she reads—perceiving in the text a reflection of her own self-image or lived experience—Christine de Pizan works to provide her female readers with as many examples of diverse feminine figures as possible. And having cultivated her readers' identification in this way, she uses it to teach them: lessons in self-worth, in prudent conduct, and in strategies for how to more

[94] *Cité*, 1.1, pp. 617-621, 1.2, p. 621.

[95] I translate here Christine de Pizan's well-known name for the location where she builds her City of Ladies: the "champ des escriptures." *Cité*, 1.8, p. 639.

[96] *Cité*, 1.2-1.8.

[97] On Christine's dilemma in the *Cité des dames* as a kind of personal amnesia, see: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 153. On Christine's loss of her sense of identity as a result of what she has read, see: Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint, "Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan's *Cité Des Dames*," in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 207–10, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015025281802.

effectively derive personalized meaning from the works they read. Acknowledging the

limits on female readers, the necessary fragmentation of the reading experience, she works

to provide diverse audiences with a guide to assembling the scattered insights derived

from their reading into a coherent whole.

While Christine de Pizan is interested in external barriers to learning, Chaucer is

more interested in the internal barriers to learning that readers construct for themselves.

He identifies these barriers variously: a desire to reap the social benefits of textual learning

without doing the hard work of attaining it; a fear of being challenged that leads one to

sabotage one's own interpretative strategies; a fixation on a single approach to reading that

excludes other viable methods; or an ossified sense of what a text can signify and how. And

what Chaucer offers his readers is a way to think through and remediate their own reading

strategies. By vividly displaying, in the figure of the pilgrim-readers of the *Canterbury Tales*,

the interpretative consequences of various maladaptive approaches to reading, he

encourages his readers to see how strategies that allow them to quickly demonstrate

textual mastery may not be the ones that ultimately serve their learning. And by

dramatizing other interpretative practices—ones that are more adaptable, more flexible,

and more personally effective, he gives his readers a range of reading options that they may

choose from and shape to their own needs. The pinnacle of these options is that which he

offers in the *House of Fame*, an earlier exploration of the processes of writing and reading.[98]

---

[98] This interpretation of the *House of Fame* is well established. On the bookish nature of the *House of Fame*, see: John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 28, 51–52; Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984), 216; Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), 28–29, 157n8, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002471519. On the *House of Fame* as a kind of *ars poetica*, see, for example: Elizabeth Buckmaster, "Meditation and Memory in Chaucer's 'House of Fame,'" *Modern Language Studies* 16, no. 3 (1986): 279–87, https://doi.org/10.2307/3194908.

As he dramatizes his narrator's affectively charged encounters with various marvelous literary sights, Chaucer outlines a practice of reading—theoretically accessible to anyone, regardless of class or education—that abandons the goal of textual mastery in favor of the experience of wonder.

By cultivating these forms of reading in their audiences, Chaucer and de Pizan are able to invite larger demographics to learn from the texts they encounter. And by granting their readers access to the didactic potential of the works they read, they open to them new possibilities for self-education, literary creation, and personal and political agency.

Methodology and Context

In this study, I rely heavily on close-reading, focusing my attention on moments in which de Pizan and Chaucer dramatize their characters' acts of reading and interpretation. By analyzing these scenes, I am able to characterize how each writer is theorizing certain key elements of the reading experience. Having extrapolated these theories, I turn them back upon the works they come from, using them to shed light on the practices of reading these writers recommend and the pedagogical strategies they use to reach and teach their readers. In keeping with my interest in dramatized scenes of reading, I necessarily perform a kind of reader-response criticism in this study. I am less interested, however, in applying existing reader-response theories to these writers' works (although I do a bit of this here and there) than I am in discovering, via detailed textual analysis, how they depicted and imagined their own readers responding, and in what ways.

In terms of its central themes and goals, my work can best be situated amongst a growing number of studies that explore changing conceptions and practices of vernacular

reading and writing in the later Middle Ages. My emphases align particularly with those of

a collection of studies that focus on the late-medieval interest in readers' subjective

experiences of reading and late-medieval writers' attempts to shape it. Key recent studies

that explore these concepts include Laurel Amtower's *Engaging Words: The Culture of*

Reading in the Later Middle Ages, Heather Blatt's *Participatory reading in late-medieval*

England, and Deborah McGrady's *Controlling Readers: Guillaume de Machaut and His Late*

Medieval Audience.[99] All of these works focus on writers' awareness of readers' variable

textual interpretations, on the personal and affective elements of the reading experience,

and the way writers sought to influence and direct this experience.[100] None, however, focus

to a significant degree on the writing of Christine de Pizan, or how her work fits in to the

broader historical tendencies they are sketching.[101]

Another key difference is that all of these studies, in one way or another, treat the

question of interpretative authority as central to their work,[102] placing the reading

experience visualized by late medieval authors in the framework of a power-struggle

between writers and readers, between writers and authors, or between writers, readers,

---

[99] Elizabeth Allen's *False Fables and Exemplary truths in Later Middle English Literature* also engages heavily with these concepts, although her focus is principally on exemplary literature.

[100] There have also been a number of recent studies of these subjects as they occur in devotional literature. See, for example: Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); and Eleanor Johnson, *Staging Contemplation: Participatory Theology in Middle English Prose, Verse, and Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). My focus, in this study, is more secular.

[101] They tend to mention her work briefly, to provide context, but they do not dwell on it at length. For a study that *does* contextualize Christine de Pizan's writing, along with that of numerous other late-medieval French authors, in terms of broader trends in the discourse of reading in late-medieval France, see: Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*.

[102] Bouchet also frames one of the chapters of her work in terms of the authority of the reader. Bouchet, 211–38.

and interpretative and textual traditions.[103] Amtower examines how readers claimed, or were encouraged to claim, the authority to interpret texts for themselves.[104] Blatt looks at how writers displayed awareness but also anxiety regarding readers' growing authority, and thus sought to manage it.[105] McGrady explores how Guillaume de Machaut, in particular, was concerned with readers' ability to reinterpret and claim ownership of his works, and how he sought (and failed) to control these activities.[106] Their analysis of shifts in readerly authority is vital in laying the groundwork for the kinds of analysis I practice here. Indeed, in many ways, my study builds from the implicit framework they establish in their writing.[107] I take it as a given, for example, that Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer recognize their readers' ability and authority to personally interpret the material they read. In my own study, however, I would like to move away from the question of authority and more towards the question of the pedagogies of reading that emerge from

---

[103] There are other differences as well in emphasis and methodology. McGrady, for example, is very interested in the individual/group and public/private distinction emerging among readers, and methodologically both she and Blatt place more emphasis on manuscript study and material culture than I do.

[104] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 1–16, and *passim*.

[105] Blatt, *Participatory Reading*, 1–19, and *passim*.

[106] McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 8–16, 44, 67–75, and passim. Her analysis of Christine de Pizan's relationship to her readers, in a separate article, similarly focuses on the concept of authority. McGrady, "Reading for Authority."

[107] Amtower, in particular, is interested in many of the same topics as I am, and certain of her conclusions parallel mine. But the framework in which she locates these conclusions is different in its focus (on authority, on self-fashioning, and on reading as a metaphor for engagement with the extratextual world). In addition, she does not discuss Christine de Pizan or her work at any great length, mentioning her in the introduction as a means to frame her analysis, but not devoting a chapter to her work. And while there are similarities in our broad understanding of some of Chaucer's goals for his readers (teaching them to be better readers, for instance), there are large differences in our analysis and our emphases.

the writerly recognition of readers' ability to interpret texts in a personalized manner.[108]

The question of authority is a potent and venerable one, but I am even more interested in

questions of access and agency: of ability, of opportunity, and of skill, rather than of power,

prestige, and control. [109]

Chapter Summary

My exploration of Chaucer and de Pizan's endeavors to teach their readers takes place over

five chapters. In my first chapter, I look closely at moments of identification in Christine de

Pizan's *Chemin de lonc estude* and *Livre des trois vertus* in order to define her theories of

identification and establish the pedagogical benefit of this phenomenon for readers.[110]

Having established the role of identification in Christine de Pizan's depictions of readerly

engagement and learning, I move on to an exploration of the ways in which this concept

informs the pedagogical strategies she employs in her two principal educational works for

women: the *Livre de la cité des dames*, and the *Livre des trois vertus.* In my third chapter, I

analyze de Pizan's *Livre de la Chemin de lonc estude*, arguing that she uses this work's

central allegorical journey, and the figure of her narrator's Sibylline guide, to represent a

---

[108] All of the aforementioned studies do involve, to varying degrees and in various ways, an examination of writers' efforts to teach their readers, but their emphases tend to be somewhat different than mine. McGrady is strongly concerned with the emergence of private readers, Amtower with questions of authority, and Blatt focuses on different forms of participation and strategies of readerly engagement than I do.

[109] For a discussion of the relationship between vernacularity and questions of access in late-medieval English writing, see: Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 322–30.

[110] I place Christine de Pizan first, despite the chronological position of her works after Chaucer's, because her intense pedagogical focus helps me to clearly establish the stakes and shape of my project. Having lain this groundwork, I then transition into Chaucer's more implicit pedagogies of reading.

process of reading whereby a reader collects the textual fragments with which she can identify and combines them into her own forms of personalized wisdom. In chapter four, I move on to Chaucer, examining how he uses the figures of the pilgrim-readers in the Canterbury Tales to dramatize problematic, hasty, and self-limiting approaches to textual interpretation and to suggest new ones. In my fifth and final chapter, I focus my attention on Chaucer's *House of Fame*, arguing that in this work he presents the experience of wonder as a viable alternative to hasty reading, one that opens up profound possibilities for creativity and learning. By placing de Pizan and Chaucer's literary-pedagogical efforts side by side, I hope to elucidate the ways in which these writers adapted to a changing readership by using their books to open new doors to learning.

Chapter 1

A Mirror for Princesses: Christine de Pizan and the Cultivation of Readerly Identification

Christine de Pizan was a teacher who was dissatisfied with her own education: a writer who felt that she could never learn as much as she wanted from her own reading.[1] Throughout her prodigious body of work, she depicts herself as a scholar with a ravenous desire for, and profound love of, knowledge.[2] At every opportunity, she seeks to read more, to learn more, and to add to her intellectual stores. What grants this desire its particular urgency is her painful consciousness of deficiencies in her early education, imposed upon her by the customs of a society that was much more eager to educate boys than girls.[3]

---

[1] Christine de Pizan's interest in educational writing is well-established in the scholarship. Indeed, a number of the works she wrote during her most prolific period (1399-1405) are explicitly didactic. For an early study that observes Christine de Pizan's educational ideas, see: Astrik L. Gabriel, "The Educational Ideas of Christine De Pisan," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (January 1955): 3–21, https://doi.org/10.2307/2707524. For a general overview of Christine de Pizan's educational works, see: Charity Cannon Willard, "Christine de Pizan as Teacher," *Romance Languages Annual* 3 (1991): 132–36. For an overview of Christine de Pizan's educational efforts that focuses on her shifting pedagogical strategies, as well as her anxieties and struggles regarding the efficacy of her lessons, see: Roberta Krueger, "Christine's Anxious Lessons: Gender, Morality, and the Social Order from the *Enseignemens* to the *Avision*," in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 16–40.

[2] On Christine de Pizan's desire for knowledge and her frequent usage of gustatory metaphors to convey this desire, see: Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, "Le goût de l'étude : saveur et savoir chez Christine de Pizan," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2000), 597–608.

[3] At the time of Christine de Pizan's writing, women were excluded from university education, although, as Roberta Krueger notes, "privileged noblewomen and *bourgeoises* could be educated in court or home settings, in convent schools, and, particularly in the later Middle Ages, in grammar schools and 'basses écoles.'" Roberta Krueger, "'Chascune selon son estat': Women's Education and Social Class in the Conduct Books of Christine de Pizan and Anne de France," in "L'Education des filles sous L'Ancien Régime: De Christine de Pizan à Fénelon," special issue, *Papers on French*

We don't know exactly what or how much Christine de Pizan learned in her

childhood or early adulthood, although it is possible to surmise based on the knowledge

she displays in her writing and her own accounts of her learning. She must have known

how to read Italian, her first language, for she was able to read and cite Dante's *Commedia*

[Divine Comedy].[4] She certainly knew how to read and write in French, and she knew Latin

well enough to translate from it.[5] In the *Livre de l'advision Cristine* [Book of Christine's

Vision], she recounts that she heard bits of "des parleurs des belles sciences et diverses

sentences et polie rethorique" ["the languages of the noble sciences and various learned

sayings and polished bits of rhetoric"], during the time when her father and her husband

were alive.[6] Her father certainly supported her educational endeavors while he lived.[7] But

the traditional curriculum of boys' schooling, as well as the possibility of higher education,

would have been inaccessible to her.[8] As Françoise Autrand puts it:

Seventeenth-Century Literature 24, no. 46 (1997): 19n1,
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015069021320. That being said, there were, on the whole,
"limited venues for female instruction in the Middle Ages," as well as no "formal curriculum of
studies for women." Krueger, 19.

[4] Françoise Autrand, *Christine de Pizan: Une femme en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 20.

[5] Autrand, 20; Thelma Fenster, "'Perdre son latin': Christine de Pizan and Vernacular Humanism," in
Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University
of Minnesota Press, 1998), 92–93.

[6] Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de l'advision Cristine*, ed. Christine Reno and Liliane Dulac (Paris:
Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2001), 3.8, p. 108; Glenda McLeod and Charity Cannon Willard, trans.,
The Vision of Christine de Pizan, by Christine de Pizan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 102.

[7] Her father, Tommaso de Pizzano, astrologer and personal physician of Charles V, was well aware
of his daughter's desire for knowledge, and he fully supported her education, as de Pizan recounts
in multiple works. Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 20–21; Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de
Pizan : Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984), 21–23, 28–31, 33–34.

[8] Krueger, "Chascune selon son estat," 19n1; Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 20.

> . . . elle n'a pas suivi le cursus des écoles, le *trivium* et le *quadrivium*, alors réservés aux garçons. Elle n'a donc pas rabâché dans les règles les sept arts libéraux, grammaire, rhétorique et dialectique, suivies de l'arithmétique, de la géométrie, l'astronomie et la musique.
>
> [she did not follow the curriculum of the schools, the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, then reserved for boys. She did not, therefore, train in the disciplines of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics, followed by arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.]

And although the finer details of her early education are lacking, we do know two things for certain: that she was deeply grateful for the things she was taught—and that the education she received was not enough to satisfy her.

Indeed, when discussing her early educational experiences, the topic she returns to most frequently is the limited and fragmentary nature of the knowledge she was able to acquire—in a large part due to restrictions imposed on her because of her gender.[9] In the *Mutacion de Fortune*, she laments the fact that custom prohibited her from inheriting the treasures of the Fountain of Knowledge from her father because of her female sex:

> Mais, pour ce que fille fu nee,
> Ce n'estoit pas chose ordenee
> Que en riens deusse amander
> Des biens mon pere, et succeder
> Ne poz a l'avoir qui est pris
> En la fonteine de grant pris,
> Plus par coustume quepar droit.
> Se droit regnoit, riens n'y perdroit
> La femmelle, ne que le filz,
> Mais, en mains lieux, j'en sui tout fis,

---

[9] In his analysis of encyclopedic tendencies in Christine de Pizan's writing, Bernard Ribémont notes how Christine de Pizan repeatedly emphasizes, throughout her works, the fragmentary nature of the knowledge she is able to gather, both from her father and from the works she reads on her own, as well as the limitations on her ability to learn and grasp as much as she would like from the works she reads. These fragments nonetheless furnish her with material for gathering knowledge and for writing didactic compilations to distribute that knowledge to others. Bernard. Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme," in *Christine de Pizan: Une femme de science, une femme de lettres*, ed. Juliette Dor and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 78–91.

> Regnent plus coustumes que drois,
> Pour celle cause, en tous endroiz,
> Je perdi, par faute d'apprendre,
> A ce tres riche tresor prendre[10]
>
> ["But since I was born a girl, it was not the norm that I would benefit in any way from my father's wealth. More by custom than by right, I could not inherit the wealth that was taken at the esteemed fountain. If justice ruled, the female would lose nothing in this regard, no more than the son. But I am absolutely certain that in many places, customs reign over justice. Therefore, due to a lack of learning, I lost out utterly on this very rich treasure."][11]

In the *Livre de la cité des dames*, Lady Reason similarly reminds Christine[12] of how her gender limited her education: although her father supported her, her mother desired that she learn conventional feminine pursuits such as spinning.[13] And in the *Livre de l'advision Cristine*, Christine confesses that she remembered only pieces of her early education, both because her youth prevented her from applying herself to study, and because "me tolloit me vaquier l'occupacion des affaires que ont communement les mariees et aussi la charge de souvent porter enfans" ["my occupation with the tasks common to married women and the burden of frequent childbearing had deprived me of it."][14]

As a result of these gendered disparities in education, all she can gather are small scraps of learning. In the *Mutacion*, she states:

> Ne me poz je tenir d'embler

---

[10] Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune*, ed. Suzanne Solente, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1959), 1.6.413-426.

[11] Geri L. Smith, ed. and trans., *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, by Christine de Pizan (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), 35.

[12] As mentioned in my general introduction, I will be referring to the historical Christine de Pizan as "Christine de Pizan" or "de Pizan," and to her various authorial personae as "Christine."

[13] *Cité*, 2.36, pp. 875-876

[14] *Advision*, 3.8, p. 108; McLeod and Willard, trans., *Vision*, 102.

Des racleures et des paillettes,
Des petits deniers, des mailletes
Choites de la tres grant richesce,
Dont in avoit a grant largece,
Et, combien qu'en aye petit,
Selon mon tres grant appetit,
Je n'en ay riens que par emblé,
Si ay povre avoir assemblé,
Il en piert bien a mon ouvrage.[15]

["I could not refrain from stealing the scrapings and the little bits, the small pennies
and little coins that fell from the very great wealth that my father had in such
bounty. And even though I have but little of it, considering my very strong appetite,
the only reason I have any at all is because I took it furtively. So I have amassed
meager wealth, which is quite obvious in my work."][16]

In the prologue of the *Epistre Othea* [Othea's Letter], she likewise apologizes that she does

not resemble her father in intellect:

. . . fors ainsi com l'en emble
Espis de blé en glenant en moissons
Par mi ces champs et coste les buissons,
Ou mïetes cheans de haulte table
Que l'en conquealt quant li mes sont notable;
Aultre chose n'en ay je recueilli
De son grant sens . . .[17]

["except as one gathers / Ears of wheat while gleaning at harvest / In the middle of
these fields, near the bushes, / Or the crumbs falling from the high table / Which one
gathers when the fine dishes are served up— / I gathered nothing else from his
great knowledge . . ."][18]

Again and again, Christine de Pizan presents herself as one who has only been able to glean

"petites goutelle[tte]s" [small grains] from the fields of knowledge, "demourans" ["scraps"]

---

[15] *Mutacion*, 1.6.452-61.

[16] Smith, trans., *Mutability*, 35.

[17] Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. Gabriella Parussa, second printing (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2008), Prologue, vv. 38-44, p. 196.

[18] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Earl Jeffrey Richards, trans., *Othea's Letter to Hector*, by Christine de Pizan (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), 32.

from the table of Philosophy, tiny nibbles of the feast of higher learning that only hint at its "tres delictable goust et saveur" ["most delectable taste and savor"].[19] What we see in her writing is a persistent sense that misogynist custom has robbed her of the ability to learn as much as she wishes.[20]

Despite these limitations, she is nonetheless able, via her long course of reading and study, to piece together a kind of fragmentary education for herself—one that enables her to write her own educational works.[21] Craving learning, she sets herself to reading as much as she possibly can, and what she gleans from this reading allows her to grow in knowledge.[22] The fruits of her labor are not, as she makes clear, an entirely satisfactory substitute for higher education. One is often conscious, when reading her works, of a sense of loss, of opportunities missed or denied.[23] Nonetheless, what reading gives her is a way, if not to reach the pure heights of scholarship, then to gain access to the possibilities of learning—to a kind of knowledge that, while necessarily incomplete, nonetheless allows

---

[19] *Cité*, 2.36, p. 876; *Advision*, 3.2, p. 94, 3.9, p. 109; McLeod and Willard, trans., *Vision*, 90, 103.

[20] Sara Rodrigues de Sousa, for example, notes "très nombreuses lamentations de Christine à propos de son arrivée tardive à l'étude et à son incapacité naturelle à comprendre certaines matières" [Christine's very numerous lamentations regarding her late arrival to study and her natural inability to understand certain matters]. Sara Rodrigues de Sousa, "Christine de Pizan, *femme savante*?," in *Christine de Pizan: Une femme de science, une femme de lettres*, ed. Juliette Dor and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 121. Rodrigues de Sousa regards this self-depiction as a tactical one on Christine de Pizan's part, one that highlights how, despite gaps in her knowledge, she is able to use it to create works that are useful. Rodrigues de Sousa, 128.

[21] Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme."

[22] *Advision*, 3.10, pp. 109-111.

[23] See, for example, *Avision*, III.8-9.

her to educate herself, teach her readers, and strive to work changes in the world.[24] And in

her own works, she strives to give this access to other women: to allow them to learn by

enabling them to imaginatively "enter" the works they read.

Indeed, what one sees in a number of Christine de Pizan's works is a sense of

reading as a means of intellectual access, allegorized as entry into various imagined spaces

where it is possible for the reader to learn. In *Le Livre de la chemin de lonc estude* [The Book

of the Path of Long Study], this imagined space is the titular path itself, along which de

Pizan's narrative persona walks following a reading of Boethius's *De consolatione*

philosophiae [Consolation of Philosophy], a sixth-century philosophical dialogue that was

profoundly influential throughout the Middle Ages.[25] The path, and the sights that Christine

sees there, appear to be largely composed of excerpts from various works she has read:

texts of mythology, of geography, of natural history, of cosmology, and more.[26] The

---

[24] For an analysis of the way Christine de Pizan highlights the utility of her knowledge, despite its incompleteness, see: Rodrigues de Sousa, "Christine de Pizan, *femme savante*?"

[25] John Marenbom, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, December 16, 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/boethius/.

[26] On the status of the titular Path of Long Study as representing, evoking, and composed of Christine de Pizan's past reading, see: Kevin Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy and the Problem of the Father: Christine de Pizan and Dante," in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 216, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035010498; Miranda Griffin, "Transforming Fortune: Reading and Chance in Christine de Pizan's 'Mutacion de Fortune' and 'Chemin de Long Estude,'" *The Modern Language Review* 104, no. 1 (2009): 56–57, https://doi.org/10.2307/20468123; Fabienne Pomel, "La Sibylle, guide et double de Christine dans l'autre monde des lettres: *Le Chemin de longue étude* de Christine de Pizan," in *La Sibylle: Parole et representation*, ed. Monique Bouquet and Françoise Morzadec (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004), para. 13, HTML, https://books.openedition.org/pur/30370; Fabienne Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice. Les métamorphoses de Christine de Pizan dans *Le Chemin de longue étude*," in *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends, Interférences (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016), para. 5, http://books.openedition.org/pur/35533; and Sarah Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre Du Chemin de Long Estude*," in *The*

suggestion is that every time she reads, Christine visits this path, for as she discusses, she "l'oz autrefois hantee" ["had frequented it at other times"] over the course of her solitary study.[27] And the more she understands from what she reads, the further along the path she can go. Indeed, the act of reading that touches off her journey in the *Chemin* is a *re-encounter* with the *Consolation* from which she is able to learn more than she had on previous readings.[28] Following this educational experience, she is able, in the allegorical space of her dream-vision, to climb Mount Parnassus and view the fountain of knowledge, something that she was never previously able to do.[29] Reading thus gives her access to a mutable space of learning, which becomes more accessible the more she learns.

This metaphor of reading as access is likewise present in those of de Pizan's didactic works that are directed explicitly at women. In the *Livre de la cité des dames* [Book of the City of Ladies], a work dedicated to the defense and moral education of women, Christine de Pizan presents her book, and the lessons contained therein, as a kind of physical space: a city in the "champ des escriptures" [field of letters] in which all virtuous women from throughout history may live, including the contemporary women who read her work.[30] This city, "built" of a series of stories about women's lives, carves out a feminine space in the literary field where women may be safe from masculine slander, learn of their own goodness, and grow in both virtue and in self-knowledge. In the sequel to the *Cité*, the *Livre*

Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 158.

[27] *Chemin*, 1115; Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 1115.

[28] *Chemin*, 202-302.

[29] *Chemin*, 1116.

[30] *Cité*, 1.8 p. 639; 2.69, p. 970.

des trois vertus [Book of the three Virtues], Christine de Pizan develops this spatial

metaphor further, suggesting that she will spread "traps" throughout this work so that she

can "catch" women who may be less virtuous. Once she has used her traps to catch them,

she will be able, by teaching them lessons in moral virtue and pragmatic social conduct, to

allow them to enter the "cage" of her city: a space that is bounded and restricted (her

writing cannot encompass the entire literary field), but that nonetheless gives women

opportunities for learning and growth.[31]

Reading, then, is figured in de Pizan's works as a form of access to learning. And in

writing educational works for a diverse range of female readers, Christine de Pizan seeks to

give this access to them: welcoming them into a place where they can attain, if not the

fullness of scholarly knowledge (which she considers to be available only through a lifetime

of study),[32] then vital lessons in self-improvement, moral wisdom, and social survival,

grounded in a sense of their potential, individuality and humanity. Inasmuch as her reading

helps her to move beyond the deficiencies in her education, she works to use her writing to

help her female readers do the same.

---

[31] *Trois vertus*, 1.1, pp. 8-9. On the positive valence of the "cage" as a place of learning, despite the animal imagery and language of subterfuge that accompanies it, see: Liliane Dulac, "The Representation and Functions of Feminine Speech in Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*," in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards, trans. Christine Reno (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 13.

[32] As Susan Groag Bell has observed, Christine de Pizan does not recommend her own course of intensive, solitary humanistic scholarship to other women. Susan Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Woman," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 173, 176–77, 178, 181–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177735. On this topic, see also Sylvia Huot, "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante," *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 362, 372–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43802011. Nonetheless, throughout her writing, she works to make women aware of their possibilities for learning and to teach them vital practical and moral lessons that they may use to improve themselves. And she strives, as I will argue in the following chapters, to give all of her readers the ability to construct knowledge from the works they read, regardless of how widely read they may be.

De Pizan had no illusions, however, that simply crafting a space for women in the field of letters would allow them to enter it—or enable them to learn anything of value once they got there. As Roberta Krueger argues, Christine de Pizan's didactic works often display a pronounced uncertainty about whether or not her lessons will stick, an anxiety that is vividly present in both of her didactic works for women.[33] There is no guarantee that one's readers will be willing or able to learn what one has to teach. And when one is dealing with readers who may lack access to traditional forms of education—as de Pizan, herself, did—the problem becomes all the more daunting. In order to educate such readers, de Pizan thus experimented throughout her writing career with strategies of pedagogical access—methods of teaching that would allow her to reach and teach them.

In the first part of this dissertation, I will be focusing on one of these strategies. It is a method that revolves around enabling readers to experience a particular kind of reading response: one that will ideally allow them both to access, and to learn from, the text that evokes it. I term this response "identification," and I argue that it is central to Christine de Pizan's didactic strategies in the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*, her two principal educational works for women. Although "identification" is not a term that de Pizan herself uses, I base my definition on the way she portrays certain key moments of learning in her works, which I will analyze in more detail in the following section of this chapter.[34] The process of identification, as de Pizan depicts it, begins with an experience of

---

[33] Krueger, "Christine's Anxious Lessons," 18, 29, 31–34.

[34] The idea of "identification" is often mentioned, but rarely theorized in much detail, in studies of Christine de Pizan's works. In defining this term via specific textual examples, I hope to make it clear how I understand this phenomenon as functioning in the particular works I am focusing on. Much of the literature on "identification" in the Middle Ages concerns devotional works, specifically the idea that readers ought to strive to identify with the suffering of Christ, in an effort to emulate

recognition, wherein an individual perceives some familiar aspect or aspects of her own life

in a narrative or a description.[35] These aspects may be more general elements of her

identity such as her age, social class, and gender, or they may be more individual elements

such as her thoughts, emotions, memories, or life experiences.[36] Certain kinds of identifying

traits appear to produce a more powerful recognition, so that an accurate depiction of a

---

him. There is a certain amount of overlap between the function of identification in devotional works and Christine de Pizan's use of the concept. The idea of identification with Christ, however, is often presented as something that a reader must strive to achieve, as the reader actively endeavors to see Christ in herself, to experience Christ's suffering, and to make herself more like Christ. Because of its spiritual nature, this devotional identification also tends to involve an implicit or explicit striving for transcendence, as well as a sense of spiritual and fleshly communion that is necessarily less present when the object of one's identification is more distant from the divine. Even when readers are encouraged to identify with figures other than Christ, such as the Virgin Mary, the sense of seeking closeness to the divine remains. Christine de Pizan's figuration of identification is much more involuntary and secular, and it carries much less of a requirement for emulation, although it also involves a sense of vicarious participation in the text. For an analysis of some of the complexities of identification in popular medieval works of affective devotion, see: Sarah Beckwith, "'Dyverse Imaginaciouns of Crystes Lyf': Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Crucifixion Piety," in *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 45–77. See also: Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 119–49.

[35] For a study of "specular encounters" (or moments of revelation and recognition in which a subject receives "crucial information pertaining to the self and various aspects of its identity") in medieval French romance, see: Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Identification, as Christine de Pizan characterizes it, can be conceived as a kind of specular encounter, and certain aspects of Maddox's definition of such encounters are relevant to my analysis, although his focus is different from mine.

[36] Depending on the nature of the objects of recognition, they can lead to a moment of what Rita Felski terms a moment of "self-intensification." Rita Felski, "Recognition," in *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 39. As Felski describes this phenomenon: "Recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others, seeing our perceptions and behaviors echoed in a work of fiction, we become aware of our accumulated experiences as distinctive yet far from unique. The contemporary idiom of 'having an identity' owes a great deal to such flashes of intersubjective recognition, of perceived commonality and shared history." Felski, 39. Identification can also, however, be triggered by a sense of "self-extension," whereby the recognition of a "metaphorical affinity" or set of parallels between a work and one's own experiences allows one to "see aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange." Felski, 39.

reader's emotions or life experiences will cause her to identify more fully with a text than a

depiction of a person who shares none of her characteristics other than her gender.

At the moment of recognition, the text becomes akin to a mirror, with the same

illusion of spatial distortion that a mirror produces.[37] The reader sees herself as

simultaneously outside and inside of the text, and as a result of this distortion, begins to

perceive the events of the narrative within the text, or the general precepts of the work if it

is non-narrative, as intimately relevant to her own life.[38] Once this recognition has

---

[37] The metaphor of the text, particularly the didactic text, as a "mirror" or "speculum" was common in the Middle Ages, variously signifying encyclopedic works, texts focused on presenting the characteristics of an ideal prince (the so-called mirrors for princes), and didactic works intended to present readers with images of virtue to emulate or of vice to avoid. Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1973; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 39–63, 95. When books were referred to as mirrors, the metaphor of the mirror generally expressed the concept of exemplarity, in the sense that by comparing oneself to an example described in the text, whether positive or negative, one might come to reflect on the similarities and differences between the self and the example, to know oneself better, and to improve oneself if one were lacking. Grabes, 95, 131, 136–37, 141–43. While Christine de Pizan does not explicitly title her works as mirrors, she does, as I will discuss below, use the metaphor of the text as mirror to evoke the experience of identification. Like the authors of mirror-texts, she also expresses the sense that texts can function as mirrors by inducing self-reflection, and that this self-reflection can function as a vehicle for knowledge and self-improvement. Grabes, 131–32. What identification does is facilitate this process of self-reflection by making it viscerally apparent to the reader how she is like the textual example. For a summary of the development of the mirror-metaphor from Antiquity to the 12th century, see: Einar Már Jónsson, *Le Miroir: Naissance d'un genre littéraire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995).

[38] In "Chaucer's Literate Characters Reading Their Texts: Interpreting Infinite Regression, or the Narcissus Syndrome," Jean E. Jost discusses a phenomenon that strongly parallels this experience of identification, which she terms "infinite regression." Infinite regression involves a reader reading a text and encountering there an image of a character reading a text, which may itself contain characters similar to the fictional reader. The result is that the real-world reader sees herself in the image of the character seeing herself, thus becoming pulled into the text, into the character, and into herself, via a profound form of introspection. Jean E. Jost, "Chaucer's Literate Characters Reading Their Texts: Interpreting Infinite Regression, or the Narcissus Syndrome," in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 172. As Jost puts it, "The creation of a character reading highlights introspection and self-creation by mirroring it, and enhances the audience's ability to identify with readers within the text." Jost, 211. Jost argues that authors make use of this phenomenon for different purposes, depending on their "philosophy of introspection, purpose for writing, and their aesthetic vision." Jost, 172. We can

occurred, the reader's attention becomes caught by the work in a way that bypasses her

will, and she becomes open to learning from it. The stronger the recognition, the more fully

the reader identifies with the work, and the greater its potential to teach her.

The didactic potential of this kind of identification is potent. If one sees one's

behavior reflected in a character's behavior, then to understand the consequences of a

character's behavior is to understand the consequences of one's own behavior. If one

recognizes one's own problems, one's own fears, one's own questions in a work of

literature, then the solutions the work puts forward to these dilemmas may feel intimately

relevant. If one sees one's experiences reflected in those of a literary character, then the

language the text uses to describe these experiences can become the language the reader

uses to think about her own experiences.[39] To see oneself in a text thus offers the potential

---

see Christine de Pizan in particular evoking this response when she describes herself as reading the *Consolation* and seeing herself in Boethius. While the depiction of a reader reading can "enhance the actual reader's ability to identify himself or herself with the character or hero," it is, according to Jost, not the only thing that can allow a reader to recognize herself in the text. Jost, 210. As she states:

> Although the nature and purposes of reading are complex and myriad . . . the process always involves learning and, for the self-reflective reader, self-discovery. This way of passively experiencing another person through reading, by imaginatively suspending the present and vicariously visiting another reality, in fact often reveals a mirror image of the self. Thus reading often embodies self-recognition within the text; it may bridge the fictive and the real if the reader finds the situation, actions, or characters true, or self-reflexive, although the content of reading may be fictive or fantastic. This personal and social imaginative escape can engross, mesmerize, transfix, and transform, but most interestingly, reflect the reader." Jost, 209.

Based on Jost's discussion of readerly self-reflection, it is my opinion that she and I are discussing comparable phenomena.

[39] My discussion of Christine de Pizan's ideas regarding identification bears distinct similarities to the process described by Laurel Amtower in her discussion of Petrarch's *Secretum*. According to Amtower, who borrows the term "identification" from Carol Everhart Quillen, when Petrarch's narrative persona describes himself as reading Augustine's *Confessions*, "he identifies with the experiences brought to life through the words on the page," seeing them as a description of his own experiences. As a result, the text enters into him and he enters into the text. Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000), 106–7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62998-5; Carol E

for a dramatic shift in perspective.[40] It is this perspectival shift that enables the reader to

intellectually and emotionally "enter" into the work: to gain privileged access to the

didactic space within.[41]

Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance : Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 15. This "act of reading inspires the empathetic responses of hope, fear, and grief; as Petrarch reads Augustine's experiences, those experiences become, in essence, his own. This sensation remains even after the text is set aside, and meaning is invested in the sensation as if the experience had happened to the reader. Any interpretation placed on the event by the writer becomes the interpretation that readers will apply to their own experiences." Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 108. In this humanist approach to reading, the most important result of the reading experience is not the learning of universal lessons, but "the making of meaning in a highly personal and individual context." Amtower, 109. It is this making of personalized meaning, of the shaping of the text to one's own context, that de Pizan promotes in her own humanist project.

[40] As Rita Felski puts it, "A fictional persona serves as a prism that refracts a revised or altered understanding of a reader's sense of who she is. The experience of self-recognition and heightened self-awareness is routed through an aesthetic medium; to see oneself as Hedda Gabler is in some sense to see oneself anew. In saying 'Hedda is all of us,' a woman comes to name herself differently, to look at herself in a changed light, to draw on a new vocabulary of self-description. Here an alignment with a fictional character sets into motion an interplay of self-knowledge and acknowledgement, an affiliation that is accompanied by a powerful cognitive readjustment." Felski, "Recognition," 35. This perceptive shaping may be productively understood in terms of Rachel Geer's analysis of La *Mendicité Spirituelle*, a popular devotional work by Jean Gerson: theologian, chancellor of the University of Paris, and de Pizan's ally in the *Querelle de la Rose*. The first part of the *Mendicité* features a dialogue between a man and his soul, in which the soul vividly describes the frustrations of unfulfilling devotional practices. This description functions as an encouragement, Geer argues, for readers to "fill in the text by thinking about their previous devotional experiences and to consider why they lacked meaning, fulfillment, and intensity." Rachel Geer, "Intimate Politics: The Poetics of Social Engagement during the Hundred Years War" (University of Virginia, 2014), 53, https://doi.org/10.18130/V3KJ9H. Not only does the text ask readers to recall their own experiences, it also rhetorically encourages readers to feel a certain way about them by using affectively charged language to describe the soul's feelings. The description of a similar experience reminds readers of their own experiences, and the affective qualities of the text's language have the potential to influence readers' perspectives on these experiences. As Geer argues: "Readers' affective engagement with the text thus occurs as they fill out the text with their personal experiences, but it also opens them to the aims of the text." Geer, 53. If readers feel with the text, "intimately inhabiting the experiences it proposes" and bringing their own experiences to bear on it, they are able to "draw personal meaning" from it. Geer, 65.

[41] As Allyson Carr argues, drawing from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, readers inevitably interpret a text from the position of their own personal context. But when the text in some way speaks to that context, when the reader is able to recognize its relevance to her life, the experience can be especially profound. As Carr states, when we see ourselves in a work, "we find ourselves and we suddenly understand more deeply about ourselves, in our contexts and in all our relations. This

One can clearly see the link between identification and access in the final sections of the *Cité des dames*. When inviting her readers into her city, Christine de Pizan assures them that they will be able to see their reflections in its walls, which are made of the stories of virtuous women. As she states: "vous pouvez veoir que la matiere dont elle est faitte est toute de vertu, voire, si reluysant que toutes vous y povez mirer et par especial es combles de ceste derreniere partie, et semblablement en ce qui vous puet touchier des autres."[42] [you can see that the material of which it is made is entirely virtuous: see, so brilliantly shining that all of you can see your reflections in it, and especially in the tops of the towers of this last part, and likewise in that which can pertain to you in the others]. To see one's reflection in a mirrored surface is to encounter an image of oneself that appears to exist in a space within and beyond this surface. Mirrors create the illusion that one is both looking into another place and standing within this place looking out. If de Pizan's readers are able to see their reflections in the stories of women that make up both text and city, then this implies that they will see themselves as if inside the city—projected backwards by the mirror into a space within the walls that is like their own, but different. Identification creates the sense of access. One can see a similar concept motivating the *Trois Vertus*, as de

_____

new perceptive ability allows us greater capacity for *phronesis*; for understanding our own contexts and how we should, and can, act in them. Finally, such revelation enables our own capacity for self-transformation." Allyson Carr, *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change*, PDF (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 207–9. Carr goes on to argue that part of the reason Christine de Pizan's writing is effective in providing opportunities for this kind of transformative experience is because her works, by virtue of the compelling authorial persona of Christine, encourage readers to "enter into them and see ourselves in them . . . we watch as 'Christine' is transformed and reoriented toward appropriate understanding, and then appropriate action. It is possible to see ourselves in her, and we are able to have the moment of 'this is how it is' that allows us to take something with us out of the story material for our own self-formation." Carr thus sees a phenomenon with parallels to identification operating in Christine de Pizan's works. Carr, 164, 207–8.

[42] *Cité*, 3.19, p. 1032.

Pizan fills the work with a staggering number of realistic representations of women. Read in terms of identification, one could understand these representations as the "traps" she sets for her female readers: opportunities for them to see themselves in the women of the narrative, to have their attention caught, and thus to perceive themselves within her literary city, where they may learn.

If identification enables the reader to experience a privileged form of pedagogical access, however, then the denial of identification can restrict this access, setting up affective barriers to the reader's full participation in the experience of reading. One can see this denial of access in the opening of the *Book of the City of Ladies*, when Christine tries in vain to recall an image of femininity in the texts she has read that is not tainted in some way by misogynist bias. She is thwarted, however, by her realization that nearly every author she has encountered has had something horrible to say about women. Marred by ignorance or deliberate misogyny, their works paint pictures that scarcely resemble the real women who may read them.[43] The upshot of this is that these texts put up active barriers to the identification of female readers: images of depraved or unrealistic female objects in whom female subjects can see no aspect of themselves. By denying identification, these works also actively interfere with women's ability to learn from them.[44] Indeed, the

---

[43] *Cité*, 1.1, and *passim*.

[44] In framing the problem in this way, I choose to take at face value de Pizan's suggestion that the prevalence of literary misogyny led authors to negatively misrepresent women and thus present affective barriers to women's identification. The prevalence of misogyny in medieval literature is certainly well-documented. See, for example: Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. W. Marx, eds., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). I do not mean to suggest, however, that there were no works whatsoever in the Middle Ages that presented women in a positive light or that rendered women's experiences in a realistic or sympathetic way. Rather, I seek to describe the problem as de Pizan represents it, while acknowledging her rhetorical purpose in presenting literary misogyny as ubiquitous. Most scholars

mere contemplation of these texts sends Christine into a state of paralyzing self-loathing

that brings her literary studies to a grinding halt.[45]

If de Pizan is to welcome women to learn from literature, to break down these

barriers to their access, then she must find a way to help them see themselves within it.

And in the *Le Livre de la cité des dames* and *Le Livre des trois vertus*.[46] this is precisely what

she strives to do. Drawing from her understanding of women's lives, and of life as a women,

Christine de Pizan works to craft a vast range of feminine literary models, grounded in

women's particular experiences, that can give her female readers opportunities for

identification, and thus fuller access to the lessons she has to teach them.[47] Aware of the

---

tend to concur with this approach, taking seriously de Pizan's anti-misogynist goals. For a rare dissenting view that argues that de Pizan created the idea of a coherent anti-feminist literature from a literary theme (of antifeminism) that lacked a "référence historique ou sociologique réel" (real historical or sociological reference), and that she did so out bad faith, in the interest of her own literary legitimation rather than in proto-feminism, see: Joël Blanchard, "Compilation et légitimation au XVe siècle," *Poétique* 19, no. 74 (1988): 139, 141, 142, 154–55, 156n8, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x001429133. While I appreciate Blanchard's reading of Christine de Pizan's practices of compilation, I feel that he unnecessarily minimizes the importance and social valence of antifeminism/misogyny in medieval literature. I thus concur with Maureen Quilligan's assessment of Blanchard's framing which, as she argues, is "in danger of denying the actual historical practice of social violence against women, as well as the existence of a literary tradition of misogyny," even as it productively suggests the way Christine de Pizan rhetorically used the anti-feminist tradition which she "may have helped reify as a 'genre'" through her attacks on it. Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 149.

[45] *Cité*, 1.1, pp. 617-621, 1.2, p. 621.

[46] The latter work is sometimes referred to as the *Trésor de la cité des dames* (Treasure of the City of Ladies). To avoid confusion with the *Livre de la cité des dames*, I will refer to it here as the *Livre des trois vertus*.

[47] Sylvia Nagel similarly regards Christine de Pizan as opening up a space for women's voices in a male-dominated literary field through mimesis of women's experience: in this case, by rendering the variety of women's speech. As she argues, Christine de Pizan's *Livre des trois vertus* responds to the need for women to "create a female voice and female identity outside the pre-existing social and rhetorical models created and imposed by men, a female voice and female identity linked to actual female experience. The only choice women have is to reproduce their speech mimetically, that is, to discover a new mimesis of women's experience." Sylvia Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational

diversity of her audience, she strives to present her female readers with pictures of women

that are similarly complex and varied. In essence, she constructs these works as "mirrors

for princesses"—not in the sense of works of political theory, but in the sense of works that

present female readers with images in which they can recognize themselves.[48] And by

granting them access to these images, she seeks not only to teach them, but to help them

discover strategies for shaping the lessons they learn to their own lives. This is de Pizan's

Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 505. It is this need, she argues, that de Pizan strives to fulfill by representing so many different kinds of women's voices in dialogue. Nagel, 505. The upshot of this representation is to provide opportunities for identification. As Nagel puts it: "different women as figures of identification for the women-readers of the book offer a wide spectrum of models of discourse . . . In this manner Christine offers with these women the possibility for her readers to identify their own experiences and their own identities with them by mimesis." Nagel, 514. Mauureen Quilligan makes a similar argument in her analysis of Christine de Pizan's self-authorization as a female writer in the *Livre de la Cité des Dames*: "Christine's subject— and her method—in writing the *Cité des dames* is the revision of tradition necessary before that tradition is capable of articulating a female's experience of history." Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*, 3. For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's efforts to express women's experiences in her lyrical poetry, see: Christine McWebb, "Lyrical Conventions and the Creation of Female Subjectivity in Christine de Pizan's *Cent Ballades d'Amant et de Dame*," in *Christine de Pizan and Medieval French Lyric*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 168– 83.

[48] Lori J. Walters makes a similar argument in her analysis of the Queen's Manuscript (British Library Harley 4431), when she notes that among the ways Christine de Pizan encourages Queen Isabel to view her work as a didactic "mirror" and treat her authorial persona as an exemplary figure is by calling attention to the traits that she shares with the queen, such as the fact that both were mothers. Lori J. Walters, "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom: The *Chemin de lonc estude* in the Queen's Manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 4431," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 5, no. 2 (2016): 236, https://doi.org/10.1353/dph.2016.0013. De Pizan enhances this "mirror-effect" by including a miniature in the frontispiece that depicts Queen Isabel's room. Walters, 232. She also, as Walters notes, states her love for things she and the queen have in common, such as their foreign origins, the names of their daughters, and their marital misfortunes. Walters, 232.

hope for her readers: that they will recognize themselves in her works and that they will

use that recognition as the basis of personalized learning.[49]

In the following sections of this chapter, I will characterize de Pizan's theories

regarding the benefits of identification and discuss the dangers of its denial. In my second

chapter, I will analyze how these theories inform de Pizan's own pedagogical strategies in

the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des Trois Vertus*. And in my third chapter on

Christine de Pizan, I will delve more deeply into how she works to enable readers to

construct personalized lessons from the works with which they identify.

Identification for the Reader

The phenomenon I term identification, and the role it plays in facilitating learning, are most

visible in two of Christine de Pizan's works: the *Livre de la chemin de lonc estude* and the

---

[49] On the idea that de Pizan encouraged her readers to identify with her by crafting "a persona 'Christine' which, in embodying a general concept of female authorship, provides her readers with a way of understanding themselves and representing themselves to others," see: Louise D'Arcens, "Her Own *Maistresse*?: Christine de Pizan the Professional Amateur," in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 130–31, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106018812187. Christine's strategies for, and understanding of, readers' engagement with the texts they read bear striking similarities to those of Guillaume de Machaut in his *Confort d'ami*, a text written to comfort Charles of Navarre after his imprisonment by King John II. As Rachel Geer argues, in order to enable the prince to experience comfort, Machaut provides scriptural stories whose characters undergo experiences and experience emotions that directly parallel Charles's own. Machaut encourages Charles to reflect on these narratives and self-reflect ("te mirer") by reading them literally rather than allegorically. The benefit of this kind of reading is that "Instead of finding an explicit lesson, readers find themselves in the story." Geer, "Intimate Politics," 76. The description of emotions that parallel readers' emotions helps them to engage with the work and connect their experiences to those of the characters. Indeed, Machaut encourages Charles to derive comfort from the stories he relates by vividly describing the emotions of characters whose feelings and circumstances are likely to parallel those of his desired princely reader. Geer, 81–82. These and other strategies encourage Charles, and other readers, to "inhabit affectively" the positions of the characters. Geer, 87. In much the same way, Christine de Pizan seeks to present feelings, narratives, and characters in her works that capture some element of readers' own experiences, with the goal of allowing her readers to see themselves in her works, to feel along with them, and to learn from them.

Livre des Trois Vertus. In the first, one can see how the experience of identification can

facilitate learning for a reader, and in the second, how identification can be used for

pedagogical purposes.

In the opening of the *Livre de la chemin de lonc estude*, de Pizan's narrator, Christine,

sits at home, struggling to cope with her grief for her husband who died many years

before.[50] Isolated and in pain, she laments the hostility of Fortune, whose cruel tricks have

made her a prisoner of her own suffering.[51] As she relates, Fortune has:

> . . . cueur et corps a desnué
> De joye et de bonne aventure,
> De tous biens par mesaventure,
> Par meschef et par meseur
> Qui pieça m'osta tout eur,
> Tant que du tout suis au bas;
> Et pour neant me debas,
> Puis qu'elle l'a enterpris,
> Mon cuer rendra mort ou pris.
> Pris est il en si dur las
> Que l'estrainte le fais las.[52]

> [. . . stripped heart and body of joy and good luck, of all good things by mischance,
> by misfortune and by bad luck, who long ago took all happiness away from me, so
> that I am the lowest of all, and I argue in vain, since she has decided to kill or
> imprison my heart. It is imprisoned in such tight bonds that it is weary of the strain.]

It is in this state of oppressive sorrow that she seeks comfort in reading. After looking

through several books, all of which seem insubstantial to her, she decides, as mentioned

above, to reread Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

---

[50] The real Christine de Pizan was left widowed at the age of 25 when her husband, Étienne de Castel, died of illness while traveling with the king. Autrand, *Une femme en politique*, 41.

[51] Christine de Pizan, *Le Chemin de longue étude*, ed. with facing page translation by Andrea Tarnowski (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000), lines 61–99.

[52] *Chemin*, 152-162

was a scholar, philosopher, and powerful Roman official who balanced his political duties with his writing and research until he was imprisoned on a spurious charge of treason and sentenced to death.[53] In the *Consolation*, he describes his narrative persona in the midst of this imprisonment, racked with sorrow and anger at his fall from fortune. In this state, he is visited by Lady Philosophy, an allegorical figure who consoles him by helping him to understand the nature of his suffering and the path towards the true good. The work is intimately concerned with the influence of Fortune (personified as a goddess) on human life, the question of free will, the organization of the universe, and the nature of the good and of God.

In terms of its topics, it is a fitting choice for the sorrowful Christine, and indeed, as she reads, she experiences a sense of relief, brought on by her identification with the suffering Boethius.[54] As she relates:

> Lors y commençay a lire,
> Et en lisant passay l'ire
> Et l'anuyeuse pesance
> Dont j'estoie en mesaisance—
> Car bon exemple ayde moult
> A confort, et anuy toult—
> Quant ou livre remiray
> Les tors fais, et m'i miray,

---

[53] P. G. Walsh, "Introduction to *The Consolation of Philosophy*," in *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*, by Boethius, trans. P. G. Walsh, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii–xxii. For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's engagement with Boethius's *Consolation* throughout her writing career, see: Anne Paupert, "Christine et Boèce. De la lecture à l'écriture, de la réécriture à l'écriture du moi," in *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, ed. Angus J. Kennedy et al., vol. 3, 3 vols. (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), 645–62.

[54] As Anne Paupert argues, in the works of Christine de Pizan, "Boèce apparaît . . . comme un insprateur et un modèle à divers titres—un modèle auquel il lui arrive même parfois de s'identifier partiellement" [Boethius appears . . . as an inspiration and a model in diverse titles—a model with which she sometimes even happens to partially identify]. Paupert, "Christine et Boèce. De la lecture à l'écriture, de la réécriture à l'écriture du moi," 650.

Qu'on fist a Böece a Romme[55]

[Then I began to read, and in reading, my anguish passed, as did the tormenting sadness from which I had been suffering—for a good example greatly helps to comfort and take away sorrow—when I examined[56] the book, the wrongs that were done to Boethius in Rome, and saw myself reflected there.]

The wording de Pizan uses to describe her reading experience: "m'i miray," is both rich and ambiguous, since "se mirer" can signify looking at something, seeing something reflected, reflecting something, thinking about something (reflecting on it), or, when followed by the prepositions "à," "sur," or "en," correcting oneself by the example of something or imagining oneself in a particular scenario.[57] Since Christine is not looking into a literal mirror, but rather reading a book, Christine de Pizan could potentially mean to indicate any of these definitions. Based on her wording and her other uses of the verb "mirer," I have chosen to render her phrase as: "saw myself reflected there." Her use of the personal pronoun "me" certainly implies a quality of self-reflection, and is consistent with de Pizan's significantly less ambiguous usage of "s'i mirer" in the *Livre de la cité des dames* in reference to the act of looking in an actual mirror. In the *Cité*, Reason holds a mirror in her right hand, and tells Christine: "Si saiches de vray qu'il n'est quelconques persone qui *s'i*

---

[55] *Chemin*, 207-217.

[56] Pizan's choice of verb, "remirer," implies looking at something with admiration. It can also imply contemplation, although this definition is attested in the DMF but not the Larousse Middle French dictionary. Robert Martin, "remirer, verbe," in *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020), http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer; Algridas Julien Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, "remirer (*v.*)," in *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français* (Paris: Larousse, 2007). In addition, it connects, via rhyme and etymology, with "m'i miray" and the idea of reading as reflective in multiple senses of the word (one reflects on the work and one sees oneself reflected in it). Indeed, the reflexive form of the verb can signify looking at or considering oneself. Martin, "remirer, verbe"; Greimas and Keane, "remirer (*v.pron.*)."

[57] Robert Martin, "mirer, verbe," in *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020), http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer; Algridas Julien Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, "mirer (*v.*)," in *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français* (Paris: Larousse, 2007).

mire, quel que la criature soit, qui clerement ne se cognoisse" [Know truly that there is not a single person who sees her reflection there, whatever kind of creature she is, who will not understand herself clearly] (emphasis mine).[58] De Pizan thus chooses to use the same phrase to refer to seeing one's reflection in a hand mirror and seeing oneself in a book, emphasizing the qualities of recognition and resemblance in the experience.[59]

It could be, of course, that by saying "m'i miray," de Pizan only means to imply that Christine is looking carefully at the work, as the individual might look carefully into Reason's mirror. The connotations of self-reflection, however, are too prominent in the passage to be fully disregarded. Rather, what stands out in Christine's description of her plight and her subsequent consideration of her reading are the similarities she sees between herself and Boethius, as well as the way that changes in her own circumstances have altered her perception of those similarities, as if the face in the mirror has changed with time.[60]

---

[58] Christine de Pizan, "*The Livre de la cité des dames* of Christine de Pisan : a critical edition," ed. Maureen Cheney Curnow, vol. 2 (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975), 1.5 p. 627.

[59] In her analysis of Christine de Pizan's self-depiction as a reader, Deborah McGrady gives a similar reading: "Echoing the advice of the university chancellor, Jean Gerson, that readers should place themselves in the affective realm of the author to benefit from a work's wisdom, Christine's study of Boethius hinges on the double meaning of *mirer* . . . to heal and reflect, as in a mirror. Through Boethius, Christine emerges as a learned reader capable of reading, studying, meditating, and responding to an authoritative text. By imitating Boethius in her own extensive study (*long estude*), she succeeds in standing in for Boethius, the consummate scholar and reader." Deborah McGrady, "Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and Her Readers," in *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 160.

[60] As Rita Felski puts it, "We do not glimpse aspects of ourselves in literary works because these are repositories of unchanging truths about the human condition . . . Rather, any flash of recognition arises from an interplay between texts and the fluctuating beliefs, hopes, and fears of readers, such that the insights gleaned from literary works will vary dramatically across space and time." Felski, "Recognition," 46.

Indeed, although Christine and Boethius are distant in time, place, and circumstances, it is clear from the description of Christine's mental state which aspects of her experience she sees reflected in his story. Christine is not a literal prisoner as Boethius was, but she feels herself the prisoner of her feelings.[61] Christine is not physically isolated from her living family members, but she is isolated by her need to hide her grief from those around her.[62] And like the suffering Boethius, Christine has suffered deep misfortune, and she is able to make meaning of her experiences by personifying Fortune as a flighty and sadistic goddess.

Her comfort at reading, it is true, could simply come from her comprehension of the precepts and messages set forth in the text, independent of any sort of identification she feels with Boethius and his predicament. Indeed, Boethius's work is explicitly framed as a consolation. As Christine later mentions, however, she has read *The Consolation of Philosophy* before. And during her previous reading, when she was not in a state of despair at her ill fortune, not only was she less able to appreciate the book, she was less able to understand it, and thus less able to apply its message to her own life.[63] After spending the entire evening reading the *Consolation*, she remarks:

Mais se j'eusse eu longue asseree,

---

[61] *Chemin*, 159-160.

[62] *Chemin*, 165-169. As Didier Lechat puts it: "Boèce est une sorte d'*alter ego* pour Christine. Contrainte de taire son chagrin de veuve en public, elle se console dans le dialogue silencieux avec Boèce." [Boethius is a sort of *alter ego* for Christine. Compelled to silence her widow's grief in public, she consoles herself in silent dialogue with Boethius.] Didier Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction » : Métamorphoses Du* Je *Chez Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, et Christine de Pizan*, Études Christiniennes 7 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2005), 392.

[63] As Miranda Griffin observes: "Christine emphasizes that it is a rereading of Boethius which consoles her: in its fortuitous new context, the *Consolation* is infused with hitherto unseen, comforting meaning." Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 62.

L'i eusse, croy, voulu user,
Tant me plaisot m'i amuser,
Car moult m'estoit belle matiere
Et de moy conforter matiere.
Ainsi pris a Böece garde
Et pensay que cellui n'a garde
Qui de vertus peut estre plains;
En joye sont tournez ses plains.
Si fus auques hors de l'esmay
Que j'avoie, mais plus amay
Ce livre qu'onques je n'oz fait,
Et mieulx consideray le effaict,
Combien que autrefois l'eusse leu;
Mais je n'avoye si esleu
Le reconfort que l'en y prent;
Bonne est la peine ou l'en apprent.[64]

[But if I could have stayed up later, I would have, I believe, wanted to do so; I was so pleased to amuse myself with it, because the subject matter was very beautiful and a cause of comfort to me. So I took heed of Boethius, and thought that one who is full of virtues need not fear; his sorrows will turn to joys. So I was somewhat brought out of my former sorrow, and I liked and understood that book more than I ever had before, and I better considered the effect. Although I had read it before, I had never realized so well the comfort that could be drawn from it. The suffering is good from which we learn.][65]

What she has learned from her suffering is how to relate more fully to the figure of

Boethius. In identifying with the Boethius-narrator's sorrow, she becomes deeply,

personally engaged in his story, mapping it onto her sense of her own lived experience.[66]

---

[64] *Chemin*, 286-302.

[65] As Miranda Griffin notes, "the fictional personae of Boethius and Christine both find solace in the deeper understanding of the true good that their misfortunes have brought them." Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 58.

[66] As Carruthers describes, when a reader remembers a portion of a work, if she has effectively constructed a memory phantasm of it, she will re-experience the emotions that occurred while she was reading it. Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 169. Each memory necessarily has an emotional component, and since emotions were experienced in the body, each memory is also necessarily physiological. Mary J. Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, eds., introduction to *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002),

Thus, as he learns how to receive consolation, she also receives this knowledge, and as he is consoled, so, too, is she.[67]

Indeed, Christine's experience of identification with Boethius does not simply give her a pleasurable affective response to the text. Rather, after reading it, she finds herself compelled to imitate, in her own life, Boethius's process of reflection on the sorrows and conflict of the world, and his search for solutions to this sorrow.[68] This reaction appears to be involuntary, for Christine goes to bed immediately after reading, but cannot fall asleep. Rather, she relates that:

> Je n'oz garde de me dormir,
> Car en un grant penser chaÿ
> Je ne sçay comment g'i chaÿ,
> Mais ne m'en povoie retraire,
> Tout y eusse je assez contraire.
> Il me va venir au devant

---

8. Feeling and the memory of feeling aid in the reader integrating the message of the text into her mind and body, meshing the material described in it with her own experience. Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 169, 174. The affective component of identification can thus be understood as an aid to memory and learning.

[67] See Miranda Griffin's argument: "just as the Prisoner is consoled by Philosophy, Christine is offered some measure of consolation by the processes of reading, learning, and understanding she dramatizes in these poems [the *Avision-Christine* and the *Chemin*]." Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 59.

[68] Indeed, Eleanor Johnson argues that this is precisely how Boethius's *Consolation* is intended to work, by virtue of the way it displays the gradual ethical transformation of Boethius's authorial persona. As she states: "In being constructed as a real-time spectacle of psychological transformation, the *Consolation* is designed not only to tell about Boethius's transformation but also to initiate a parallel process of transformative consolation for a reader by facilitating identification between that reader and Boethius himself." Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 8.This effect is due to the work's nature as a "protreptic" text, one that "teaches ethics by facilitating identification between its reader and its narrator who is also the protagonist of an ethical quest for truth. It teaches ethical transformation to a reader by modeling an ethical transformation in its own narrator." Johnson, 9–10. In identifying with Boethius and learning from him, then, Christine is presented as taking full advantage of the protreptic possibilities offered by the text.

Comment ce monde n'est que vent:
Pou durable, plain de tristour,
Ou n'a seürté ne bon tour,
Ou les plus grans ne sont asseur
De fortunë et de meseur[69]

[I could not find a way to fall asleep, because I fell into deep thought. I do not know how it befell me, but I could not pull myself away from it, although I tried very much to oppose it. It occurred to me how the world is nothing but wind, transient, full of sorrow, where there is neither certainty nor goodness, where the greatest are uncertain of fortune and of misfortune.]

Reading the book and identifying with Boethius has not just altered her mood—it has altered her thought processes and her behavior. Awake in bed, she mentally repeats Boethius's journey from sorrow to consolation, beginning with an uncontrollably compelling reflection on the turmoil of the universe and ending by reassuring herself that believing in God and battling against the changeable world will allow one to find peace.[70] And much as Boethius is aided in his search for wisdom by a consultation with a female mentor who embodies his years of study, so, too, does Christine, once she falls asleep, experience a vision in which she finds herself guided along the allegorical "path of long study" by a profoundly wise female mentor, the Cumaean Sibyl.[71]

---

[69] *Chemin*, 310-20.

[70] As Anne Paupert notes, "elle insiste aussi sur l'effet que produit sur elle cette lecture, qui la détouyrne de ses préoccupations présentes et de son chagrin, comme elle prend soin de le répéter au début et à la fin de ce passage (vv. 204-05, 210-12 et 295-96), et agit comme un 'réconfort' (vv. 214, 290, 300-01), analogue à celui que Philosophie prodigue à son auteur. De la lecture comme 'consolation'…" [she also insists on the effect this reading has on her, which turns her from her present preoccupations and her grief, as she takes care to repeat at the beginning and at the end of this passage, and acts as a "comfort," analogous to that which Philosophy lavishes on her author]. Paupert, "Christine et Boèce. De la lecture à l'écriture, de la réécriture à l'écriture du moi," 647.

[71] A number of scholars have commented on the resemblance between the Sibyl in the *Chemin* and Lady Philosophy, as well as the parallel roles they play in Christine de Pizan's work and Boethius's. See, for example: Glynnis M. Cropp, "Boèce et Christine de Pizan," *Le Moyen Age* 87, no. 3–4 (1981): 393; Pomel, "guide et double," para. 9; Andrea Tarnowski, "Pallas Athena, la science, et la chevalerie," in *Sur le chemin de longue étude… actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, ed. Bernard.

In an experience that parallels the shift in understanding that occurred when she re-read Boethius's *Consolation*, Christine follows the Sibyl in her dream along a road she has walked before, but this time she is able to go further than she ever has, across the earth and up into her heavens.[72] The changes in her life that made her similar to Boethius—that allowed her to identify with him—have thus given her fuller access to a mental space where she can work to make sense of all that she has learned from her studies. As Didier Lechat argues: "La lecture stimule la méditation de Christine sur les malheurs du monde, elle suscite une identification et donne l'impulsion initiale de cette rêverie, bientôt transformée en rêve et en pèlerinage allégorique." [Reading stimulates Christine's meditation on the misfortunes of the world; it produces an identification and gives the initial impetus for this reverie, soon transformed into a dream and an allegorical pilgrimage].[73] Travelling in the company of the Sibyl, Christine is able to connect what she has read in Boethius to the unstable political environment of France and to contemplate possible solutions.[74] Inside of her mind, she walks along a road "plus que parchemin/ Ouvert" [More open than parchment], an open book that can take her beyond the page by

---

Ribémont, Études Christiniennes 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 151. I will discuss this resemblance more fully in the third chapter.

[72] Upon learning the name of the path from the Sibyl, Christine relates: "Adont soz je bien ou j'estoye, / Car celle bien cognoistre doy— / Tout le me monstrast elle au doy— / Car je l'oz autrefois hantee, / Mais par ce lieu n'y fus montee." [Then I knew well where I was: I had to know it, all that she pointed out to me with her finger, because I had frequented this path before, but I had never climbed near this place]. *Chemin*, 1112-1116.

[73] Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction »*, 393.

[74] See Allyson Carr's argument that seeing oneself in a text facilitates the translation of the text to one's own context. Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 205–8. For an analysis of how the reader's act of internalizing the reading experience and making the text one's own ties into the idea of adapting the text to a new historical context, see: Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 17–18.

enabling her to intervene in real-world problems.[75] Identification gives her access to

learning, and this learning is framed as access to a physical space, a space inside of the self

that points outward to the world. This is the kind of access that de Pizan strives to give her

female readers.

Christine's identification with Boethius is, it is true, largely a matter of

happenstance: she revisits his book precisely when she resembles him most profoundly.[76]

But in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*, a conduct manual for women of all social classes in society,

de Pizan suggests that a person with pedagogical goals (much like herself) can deliberately

cultivate the identification of a listener in order to enable her to internalize a particular

message.

This can be seen in the beginning of the work, in the interactions between the figure

of a prideful princess and the voices that speak within her mind. As the work opens, de

Pizan describes this princess as the victim of "temptacion" [Temptation],[77] a voice in her

head that encourages her to behave in ways that are prideful, vengeful, greedy, and

selfish.[78] In its speech to the princess, Temptation appeals directly to familiar aspects of her

experience, painting a picture of the life she is currently living and how she could augment

it, all the while flattering her selfishness and vanity. Thus it refers to the power she wields

---

[75] *Chemin*, 925-6.

[76] See Miranda Griffin's argument that Christine de Pizan, by emphasizing the role of chance in her encounter with Boethius's text, as well as choosing a text that so heavily thematizes the concept of fortune, highlights "the contingency of the reading encounter," as well as the elements of chance inherent to any reading experience. Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 61–62, 57.

[77] All translations of de Pizan's writing are my own unless otherwise noted.

[78] Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre Des Trois Vertus*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1989), 3.11 p. 47.

because of the "hault prince" [high prince] who is her "seigneur" [lord/husband], the respect she receives because of her royal "enfans" [children], and the advantages granted by the "richece" [wealth] and "poissance" [power] she enjoys by virtue of her position.[79] It refers to her familiar habits, such as her habit of taking vengeance for petty slights, reminding her of the people who have wronged her, on whom she will surely revenge herself eventually.[80] In order to persuade her to continue requesting fancy foods and acquiring wealth and comforts, Temptation reminds her that: "vins et viandes ne peuent fail- |lir, de ce peux tu avoir a ta plaisance, et tous aultres delices" ["you cannot lack for wines and foods; you can have them whenever you like, and every other pleasure."].[81] And in order to persuade her to continue spending lavishly on fashion, Temptation calls her attention to the deficiencies in her wardrobe, assurring her that she needs "Tieulx robes, tieulx paremens, tieulx joyaulx, tieulx abillemens ainsi et ainsi fais; tu ne'en as nulz de si nouvelle façon" [such dresses, such ornaments, such jewels, such clothing made just so; you don't have anything in the new fashion].[82] While it is not made explicit that Temptation's appeal to her experience is what seduces the princess to listen to its blandishments, it is clear that its strategies are rhetorically effective, since the princess is, by her own admission, habitually proud and vindictive, just as Temptation wishes her to be.[83]

---

[79] *Trois vertus*, 1.3 pp. 12-13.

[80] *Trois vertus*, 1.3 p. 12-13.

[81] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p.13; Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 7.

[82] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p.13.

[83] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 15.

The only way the princess can recover from her temptation, according to the narrators, is by listening to the words of the allegorical figure of "l'amour et craintte de Nostre Seigneur" [the Love and Fear of Our Lord] who enters the narrative as another voice that speaks to the princess and strives to save her from her sinful ways.[84] He begins his speech to the Princess by chastising her for her forgetfulness, stating: "En petit d'eure avoyes oublié cognoiscence de toy meismes! Ne sces tu que tu es une miserable creature, fresle et subgiecte a toutes enfermetéz, et a toutes passions, maladies et aultres douleurs que corps mortel puet souffrir?" [In a short time you have forgotten your understanding of yourself! Do you not know that you are a wretched creature, frail and subject to all of the infirmities, passions, maladies, and other pains that a mortal body can suffer?].[85] His goal is to help the princess remember what she has forgotten: her own human wretchness and fallibility. Despite his stated desire to restore her self-awareness, however, he initially focuses on describing the princess in very general terms, as a mortal being subject to sin and death. As a result, his early admonitions to her do not seem to adequately reflect her lived experience. After insulting her by calling her a "fole musarde mal | avisee" [foolish and ill-advised buffoon], for example, he goes on to tell her how "miserable," "fresle" [frail], and "dolente" [sad/wretched] she is, how she has no advantage over any others, and how when she dies, she will rot in her finery just as surely as if she were clothed like a poor woman.[86] The princess does not respond to any of these words, however, perhaps because they are distant from her current state. She does not feel herself to be wretched—on the contrary,

---

[84] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

[85] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

[86] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

she lives in wealth and comfort, surrounded by maids who are eager to wait on her every need.[87] She does not consider herself pitiful and disadvantaged—rather, she is well aware of the "poissance" [power] she exercises over others.[88] And while she does wear finery, that hardly makes her equal to one who wears coarse cloth.

The Love and Fear of Our Lord does briefly reference more familiar aspects of her life, such as her desires: for example, by asking her if she wants to ignore the fact that "ce chetif vaissel, vuit toute vertu, qui tant veult de honneurs et d'aises, deffauldra et morra" [this weak vessel, void of all virtue, that desires honors and comforts so much, will degenerate and die].[89] And in order to highlight his point that one cannot take one's earthly goods with one in death, he mentions some of the things she possesses, inquiring: "que te vauldront lors honneurs n'avoirs, ne ton grant parenté, desquel-|les choses en ce monde tant tu t'aloses?" [when you don't have honors, or your grand parentage, or those worldly things of which you boast so much, what value will they have for you?].[90] These aspects of her life, however, are presented in a context of hypothetical loss and deprivation. He asks the princess if she has forgotten that her body will perish (which has not yet occurred), and he pushes her to envision herself as lacking honor, family, and possessions, all of which she has. Unlike Temptation's projections about the future, which postulate the continuation of her current state, these projections ask her to imagine herself in a state of abjection that is dramatically different from her current one. The image of a poor and dying princess is one

---

[87] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 12.

[88] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 13.

[89] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

[90] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

in which she has difficulty recognizing herself. These details may help her see the relevance

of the Love and Fear of Christ's message to her, but they are not enough to bring her to the

point of identification.

It is only when the figure begins to speak about a characteristic she knows she

currently possesses, coupled with references to stories she is familiar with and to her own

habitual ways of thinking, that the princess is affected enough to respond to his criticism of

her. Thus it is that after threatening her with damnation on the basis of the vaguely defined

way she has "mal vescu" (lived badly), the Love and Fear of Our Lord reprimands the

princess specifically for her pride, saying:

> O dolente! Tu es si aveuglee que tu n'avises ton grant peril. Mais ce fait le grant
> orgueil qui, pour cause de ces vain honneurs ou tu te vois enveloppee, estaint en toy
> si toute raison que il semble que tu ne cuides mie seulement estre princepece | ou
> grant dame, mais si comme une droicte deese en ce monde. Ha! ce faulx orgueil,
> comment le sueffres tu en toy! Et si sces par le raport de l''Escripture que Dieu le het
> tant que il ne le puet souffrir? Car pour celle cause trebucha il Lucifer, le prince des
> anemis, du ciel en enfer, et certes aussi fera il toy, se tu ne t'en gardes.[91]

> [O wretch! You are so blinded that you are unaware of your great peril. But this is
> because of the great pride that, because of the vain honors that you see surrounding
> you, extinguishes all reason in you so that you seem to think of yourself as not only a
> princess or a grand lady, but as an actual goddess in this world. Ha! This false pride;
> how can you allow it in yourself if you know by the report of Scripture that God
> hates it so much that he cannot abide it? For this reason, he cast Lucifer, the prince
> of enemies, from heaven into hell, and he will surely do the same to you, if you are
> not careful.]

Here, albeit in a limited fashion, he presents the princess with an image in which she can

see herself as she currently is. He mentions her pride, which she certainly suffers from, and

he states that it comes from the vain honors which she sees enveloping her. She does,

indeed, see these honors all around her, for in the opening of the previous chapter, she is

---

[91] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 15.

described as waking up in luxurious surroundings, with maids ready to do whatever she may bid them.[92] In addition to evoking her surroundings, he evokes her thoughts, mentioning that she seems to think of herself as more of a goddess than a princess. This may very well be true, as he does display, later in his speech, an insight into how the princess habitually thinks. He also alludes to the princess's knowledge, reminding her of what she knows of Scripture and asking her to consider how this contradicts the way she behaves. He speaks to her current thoughts and feelings, her immediate environment, and her own awareness of right and wrong. Immediately upon hearing these statements, ones that are consistent with both her lived experience and her sense of self, the Princess replies:

> O Orgueil! racine de tous maulx, certainnement je cognois que de toy viennent tous les aultres vices. Et ce puis je cognoistre en moy meismes, car pour cause de toy, et non pour autre achoison, je suis souvent embature en yre, desirant vengence, si comme je pensoye nagaires; et me fais sembler que je doy estre redoubtee et prisee sur toutes les aultres et chascun suppediter, et que pour ce je ne dy riens souffrir qui me desplaise, mais tantost me vengier, tout soit le mesfait petit.[93]

> [O Pride! Root of all evils, certainly I know that all of the other vices come from you. And I can recognize this in myself, for because of you, and for no other reason, I am often driven to anger, desiring vengeance, like I was not long ago; and [pride] makes it seem to me that I should be feared and prized above all others and submitted to in everything, and that because of this I do not have to endure anything that displeases me, but immediately avenge myself, even if the misdeed is small.]

The princess is not responding to the general threats that have been made towards her. Rather, her response is to a particular cluster of details in which she can recognize her own specific flaws—the portion of his criticism that strikes a chord of familiarity in a way that the previous imagery did not. Indeed, this is the only time the princess directly interrupts

---

[92] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 12.

[93] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 15.

The Love and Fear of Our Lord. Because she recognizes the emotion of pride in herself, she is able to link his description of the dangers of pride to her own experiences with it, considering how it relates to her habitual patterns of thought and action.

Once the Love and Fear of Our Lord sees this, he begins to more deliberately use identification as a method of teaching—altering his pedagogical strategy by personalizing his admonitions to the princess. Before her interruption, he gives more general criticisms and warnings about the consequences of sin, but once he observes the effectiveness of appealing to the princess's experience, he begins to remind her of the way she habitually thinks, feels, and acts in order to persuade her that her pride is damaging her. Thus he mentions a familiar negative aspect of her pride: the way it fills her with sorrow by making her afraid that someone will surpass her. He mentions how she speaks to herself in the privacy of her own head, and how this is inconsistent with virtue. And he reminds her of how she requests rich foods and considers others to be beneath her: the same things Temptation mentions, but in a context that exposes their more sinister qualities.[94]

These strategies are extremely effective. Once the princess is alone with her own thoughts, and has time to think through what the Love and Fear of Our Lord has told her, the text states that "quelque bonne que elle soit, se reputera estre la pire de toutes" (No matter how good she may be, she will think that she is the worst of all).[95] And once the princess comes to this conclusion, rather than talking in first person, she begins to speak of herself in the second person, following the pattern of the figure's speech to her, and

---

[94] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, pp. 15-20.

[95] *Trois vertus*, 1.5, p. 20.

referring to herself as "dampnee" [damned] and "dolente" [wretch].[96] After she recognizes

herself in his speech, the lines between speaker and listener blur, so that the figure's voice

and the princess's voice become merged. Upon seeing herself mirrored in the figure's

depiction of a prideful princess who risks damnation for her arrogance, the Princess

applies both the characteristics of this depiction, and the moral judgments attached to it, to

herself, and is able to use the fear and disgust generated by this recognition as motivation

to improve.[97] Identification has helped her to learn.

In this sense, the Love and Fear of Our Lord is presented as an ideal teacher. He

realizes that in order to reach his student, he has to produce an image of her in which she

can recognize herself: familiar enough to identify with but different enough to give her a

new perspective on her life.[98] In much the same way, de Pizan seems to conceive of the

---

[96] *Trois vertus*, 1.5, p. 21.

[97] By inducing identification in the princess, the Love and Fear of Our Lord has, in essence, made his description of her functional as a negative example. Until the princess sees herself in the image he presents her, she refuses to reflect on her own ways. But the recognition of her similarity to the image of a wicked princess inspires her with revulsion, and thus the desire to distance herself from the image. What makes the text function as an admonitory mirror is thus this experience of recognition. For more on the genre of the admonitory mirror-text, see: Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, 53–57.

[98] One can see parallels between the Love and Fear of Our Lord's speech to the Princess and other "specular encounters," as Maddox defines them, in medieval French literature. In such encounters, "the signifying 'other' confronts the 'self' with new or unfamiliar knowledge . . . this localized cognitive transfer creates an intersubjective enclave, in which the informant places the addressee before a *speculum* that mirrors its discovery of a modified self-image . . . This recontextualization of self-perception normally propels the self into a transitional phase while also reviving narrative momentum." Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, 11–12. Maddox goes on to observe that when the "other" in the specular encounter is a "speaking informant" as opposed to written or figural, the direct discourse has a distinct rhetorical element, often involving "apostrophe; evaluation of the present situation; evocation of a misfortune; allusion to the past; anticipation of the future; admonition to act . . . In short, the informant typically issues a threefold mandate to the addressee: to discover, to believe, and thus to behave, commensurate with a specific disclosure." Maddox, 12. He also notes that "Occasionally, the exchanges in direct discourse are followed by responsive, meditative monologues on the part of the newly enlightened addressee, suggestive of

ideal writer as one who understands the methods by which readers understand and internalize the material they read and who shapes her own writing accordingly.

Identification as Reading Pedagogy

In the experiences of Christine and the Princess, one can see the potent pedagogical potential of identification. The experience of identification can help the reader to viscerally recognize the relevance of a work to her own life and to internalize the lessons she draws from it. It can open new perspectives and modes of thinking that she can use to better understand and shape herself and her environment.[99] As a tool that writers may use to teach their readers, it also has a great deal of potential. By providing readers with access points in the form of recognizable characters and scenarios, writers can encourage their readers to find themselves in their works and take the lessons of these works into themselves. If they understand their audience: what kinds of people they are, what kinds of problems they have, and what kinds of experiences may have shaped them, they can draw on these things, much as the Love and Fear of Our Lord does, in creating characters and narratives that are designed to help their readers learn.

They can also, to a certain degree, endeavor to shape the lessons their readers take away, by virtue of how they design these access points. For example, by presenting the princess with a recognizable image of herself, but one that is loathsome, The Love and Fear

---

an underlying concern with the modes by which knowledge is acquired, as well as with the impact of its acquisition on subjective states." Maddox, 13. We can see most, if not all, of these elements in the address of the Love and fear of Our Lord to the Princess.

[99] See Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 207.

of Our Lord helps her to understand the vileness of her sins.[100] He is, in essence, using her identification to shift the frame with which she views herself—placing a version of her in a new context (that of the text) that is similar enough to her own life that it alters her perspective on her actions and environment.[101] By reminding her of the familiar thoughts that led her to misbehave, the harm her pride has already done to her, and the terrible consequences if she does not change, he enables her to not only see herself in the text, but see herself as he sees her, and to understand what has made her that way.

He also gives her opportunities to think beyond what he has shown her and to take his lessons in different directions. This is because, however potent it may be, the shift in perspective produced by identification does not amount to indoctrination of the reader by the author. For one thing, transformation cannot be forced upon a reader: effective identification requires a reader who is at least a little open to learning from the text. In the opening of the third book of the *Trois Vertus*, for example, the Three Virtues address readers by telling them not to behave like:

> . . . aucuns folz ou folles, qui soit trop aises quant ilz sont au sermon et le prescheur parle sur la charge de aucun estat qui ne leur touche, | et trop bien le nottent et dient que il dit voir et que c'est bien dit, mais quant ce vient ad ce qui leur puet touchier et

---

[100] On the necessity for there to be both similarity and difference between the reader and the example in order for the example to be effective, see: Sarah Kay, "The Didactic Space: The City in Christine de Pizan, Augustine, and Irigaray," in *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*, Germanistiche Symposien Berichtsbände 23 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 440–42, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106011256432.

[101] In her second-to last chapter, Carr discusses the idea that seeing oneself in a work of literature can affect how one perceives one's own world, as it does with the princess and with Christine. As she argues: "Fiction deals with possibilities and the ability to think in or of a different realm while still seeing how that difference is connected to this realm out of which it comes." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 209. Because of this, "When we allow and work with fiction to transform our self-understanding, it cannot help but change the way that we perceive the world." Carr, 210.

apertenir, ilz baissent la teste et cloent les oreilles, et leur semble que on leur fait grant tort d'en parler et ne prennent garde a leurs fais, mais oïl bien aux autres![102]

[. . . those foolish men or women who are all too content when they are at a sermon and the preacher is talking about the responsibilities of some estate that does not concern them—they note it well and say that he speaks truly and that it is well said—but when it comes to that which can touch or pertain to them, they lower their heads and close their ears, and it seems to them that he is doing them great wrong to speak of these things, and they don't have a care for their own deeds, but they hear well those of others!]

Self-recognition, much less the perception of information that is relevant to one's class, can do nothing to teach those who refuse to be taught. It may shock or disturb, but it requires a reader willing to go further if it is to be truly transformative. For the willing reader, however, it opens up opportunities for thought beyond the explicit or implicit message of the text.

Indeed, even though writers can coax their readers to have certain feelings towards the models they provide, the lessons these readers derive from these texts are shaped by the synthesis of text and experience: the reader is not becoming the text so much as using it as a lens through which to view her life.[103] Recognizing the self in the text does not

---

[102] *Trois vertus*, 3.1, p. 172.

[103] Samuel McCormick makes a similar point when discussing Christine de Pizan's usage of exemplary figures in a letter to Queen Isabeau of Bavaria urging her to intervene in a conflict between the dukes of Orleans and Burgundy. Samuel McCormick, "Mirrors for the Queen: A Letter from Christine de Pizan on the Eve of Civil War," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 247, 277, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630802210344. As he notes, the exemplary women de Pizan includes in her letter all take actions in scenarios similar to those that Isabeau found herself in, inasmuch as they all attempt to control "an unruly male figure." McCormick, 281–82. By presenting the queen with these figures: "Christine provides her with an opportunity to imagine and to judge it [the conflict] from viewpoints other than her own, specifically those of women who have either managed or mishandled similar circumstances." McCormick, 284.. That being said, McCormick argues that the queen is neither invited to empathize with these women or to replace her perspective with those of the exemplary women: "Instead, the rhetoric of exemplary figures encourages Isabeau to be and to think *in her own identity* where actually she is not, to consider *her*

transform the reader into a copy of the object of identification. Rather, as Allyson Carr

argues: "seeing and understanding possibilities relevant to our situation enables us to

approach the story mimetically in our own fashion, in ways that—despite being mimetic—

likely will vary from the story as laid out."[104]

Thus, while the prideful princess does indeed internalize her interlocutor's

judgments, her decision to improve herself is her own, born of her sense of her own

capacity for reason.[105] As she says to herself: "Or vois la difference des deux chemins : le- |

quel prendras tu? Seras tu si enragee que tu te fiches en la bourbe pour te noyer et perir, et

laissier la saine, belle et seure voye qui conduit a sauveté? Nanil, nanil, tu ne seras pas si

mal conseillee que tu laisses le bien pour prendre le mal." ["Now you see the difference

between the two paths. Which one will you take? Will you mire yourself down, in danger of

suffocation, and leave the clean, beautiful, and safe way which leads to salvation? No, no,

---

own role in the Orléans Burgundy conflict vis-à-vis the roles other women have played in similar circumstances. In this sense, Veturia, Esther, Bathsheba, Blanche, Jezebel, and Olympias are not remote lenses through which Isabeau can regard the Orléans Burgundy conflict, but intimate mirrors in which to reflect (on) her current relation to this conflict." McCormick, 284. Reflecting on these figures should ideally turn the queen's gaze back on her own life.

[104] Indeed, as Carr argues, to ignore one's own experience in interpreting a text would be pointless: "If, for example, I were to decide to take Christine's stories as a set of specific instructions or blueprints for my life and actions, I would not be engaged in phronetic reading (because much of the specifics of her stories would not be at all appropriate to my context)." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 210.

[105] On Christine de Pizan's more general appeal in this work for her female readers to use their faculties of reason to better their lives, see: Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 180–82, 188; Marion Guarinos, "Individualisme et solidarité dans *Le livre des Trois Vertus* de Christine de Pizan," in *Sur le chemin de longue étude… actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, ed. Bernard. Ribémont, Études Christiniennes 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 89–90, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046884956.

you will not be so foolish[106] as to lay aside the good to take up the evil!"].[107] The core

lessons of her experience—that she needs to change and that she is willing to choose good

over evil—come not from her interlocutor, who simply shows her the error of her ways,

but from the princess's reflection on the implications of his words. The involuntary

experience of identification opens her to learning and shapes her perspective, but once she

is open to the possibility of change, it is her active reflection that allows her to make those

changes.

Indeed, after she receives, via divine inspiration, a description of the difference

between the active and the contemplative life, two "paths" she could take towards

salvation, she takes the time to deliberately consider which path she should choose on the

basis of her sense of her own identity. Thus she says to herself: "C'est que je doy avisier

ains que je entrepreingne quelconque chose, premierement la force ou foiblece de mon

propre corps | et la fragilité en quoy je suis encline, aussi a quel subgection il convient que

je obeisse selon l'estat ou Dieu en ce monde m'a appellee et commise."[108] ["This is what I

must consider before I undertake anything at all. First I ought to think of the strength or

weakness of my poor body and the frailty to which I am inclined, and also of what level of

submission it is appropriate for me to assume, according to the estate where God has called

me and which He has entrusted to me in this world."].[109] After considering her weakness of

spirit and her reluctance to turn her back on the world and her family, she decides that a

---

[106] Christine de Pizan's phrase is "mal conseillee," or ill-advised.

[107] *Trois vertus*, 1.5, p. 22; Lawson, trans. *Treasure*, 13.

[108] *Trois vertus*, 1.7 p. 26.

[109] Lawson trans., *Treasure*, 16.

mix of the active and contemplative lives would be the best fit for her.[110] Once she has come

to this conclusion, she goes on to apply it to her own behaviors moving forward. Although

the experience of identification shocks her out of complacency and leads her to view herself

in a particular way, the practical lessons of this experience only come when she takes the

time to come to her own rational conclusions and shape her learning to herself.[111]

Similarly, in the *Chemin de lonc estude*, Christine sees her own experiences reflected

in Boethius's, and this recognition leads her to view her own experiences through the lens

of the text. But, as I will discuss more fully in Chapter Three, this does not have the effect of

converting Christine into an exact philosophical replica of Boethius. She finds his ideas

helpful for resolving her sorrow, and his work inspires her to reflect on the political turmoil

that surrounds her. She even, immediately after her reflections, tries to apply a version of

Boethius's conclusions to her worries about the state of the world, reassuring herself that

even if everything on earth is in a state of chaos, consolation can be found in striving to live

well and in considering the ways of God.[112] Once Christine falls asleep, however, the rest of

the work is taken up by a dream in which she, under the guidance of a mentor who is like

Philosophy but personalized to herself, is able to journey to the heavens and witness a

celestial debate over how the world's various crises are to be resolved. Identifying with

---

[110] *Trois vertus*, 1.7.

[111] What she is doing, as I will discuss further in the following chapter, is exercising prudence, de Pizan's version of the Aristotelian *phronesis*, and one of the chief skills, as Allyson Carr argues, that de Pizan wishes to teach her readers. Karen Green, "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," in *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400-1800*, The New Synthese Historical Library 63 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 24–25; Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 211.

[112] *Chemin*, 437-450.

Boethius gives her a means of consolation and material she can use in thinking through her problems, but her goals and desires lead her to follow different paths and pursue different conclusions.[113]

Identification, then, is not a substitute for further interpretation but an impetus for it. It gives the reader access to a particular perspective, lesson, or experience and a profound sense of its relevance. It allows the reader to perceive textual experiences as integrated with her own, and gives her access to lessons that are shaped to her life. But it is only by doing something with these lessons, thinking beyond the text, that the reader can learn and change. By cultivating readerly identification, writers are able to offer these kinds of learning experiences to their readers, as well as guide them through the process of reflecting on the things they see in the mirror.

Identification Denied

By giving readers carefully crafted images and scenarios in which they are likely to recognize themselves, writers can promote a reading experience that is profoundly conducive to personalized learning. The flipside of the benefits of identification, however, is that if readers cannot find themselves in a text, then this may hinder their ability to learn from it. It is possible, of course, for a reader to voluntarily strive to emulate a character within a work and consciously apply the work's precepts to her life, even if she does not intuitively perceive their relevance to her. As we see in the above examples, however, a significantly more profound learning experience occurs when the reader or listener's

---

[113] As Anne Paupert argues, Boethius functions as an intellectual, philosophical, and literary model for Christine de Pizan throughout her works. He is, however, a model that she adapts to her own ends. Paupert, "Christine et Boèce. De la lecture à l'écriture, de la réécriture à l'écriture du moi," 651–52.

attention is captured involuntarily by the recognition of an aspect of herself in a text. When

the Love and Fear of Our Lord describes the princess's flaws in general terms, she makes no

comment, but when he describes her familiar thoughts and feelings, she is overcome with

recognition. Christine previously had less success at understanding the meaning of

Boethius's text, but when her life experiences came to resemble Boethius's more closely,

she was able to comprehend the text more completely and better apply its teachings to her

life. The more similar the reader is to the character, the easier it is for the reader to identify

with this character.[114] In contrast, when there is nothing in the work that resembles the

reader enough to induce the involuntary response of identification, the reader is essentially

barred from this intimate, personal experience of the lessons contained in the text, and is

instead forced to contemplate them at a more distant remove.

In some ways, this is a good thing, as whether or not a reader can identify with a

work of literature may function as a helpful indicator of the relevance of that work to her

life. If there is no place in the work where the reader can see an image of herself or her past

experience, it may be because it has nothing to teach her at the present time. Under such

circumstances, it may actually be dangerous for a reader to try and force herself to identify

---

[114] Here, another similarity can be drawn between Petrarchan conceptions of the reading experience and de Pizan's own theories. As Amtower argues, "The experience of the profound depends on immediacy, on having direct, even fearsome application to the feeling, emoting self rather than to an abstraction of everyman. The narrator Petrarch observes that though he can universalize experience to some extent, dogmatic universals have little of the impact of discourse directed specifically at himself as speaker and participant." Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 108–9. She goes on to quote Petrarch's *Secretum*: "[T]he reproaches of the Master seemed in a sense more directed against men in general than against myself, yet those which to me came closest home I have graven with more especial vividness on the tablet of my memory." Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch's Secret, or the Soul's Conflict with Passion*, trans. William H. Draper (Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1978), 5–6, quoted in Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 109. The more personally applicable the material feels, the more vividly the reader remembers it, and the more vividly its message is "inscribed" on the mind. Amtower, 109.

with a work, as this can lead to her internalizing lessons that are either irrelevant or harmful.

The dangers of forced identification can be seen clearly in the opening of the *Livre de la cité des dames*, when the Christine-narrator is taking a break from her studies and decides to read something entertaining. Upon discovering a work by Matheolus in a pile of books she is storing on behalf of another person, she decides to read it, as she has heard that it "parloit bien a la reverence des femmes" [spoke well in reverence of women].[115] Shortly after beginning the book, however, she discovers that this is far from the truth. She is shocked by "les parolles and mateires deshonnestes de quoi il touche" (the dishonorable words and topics it discussed) and after flipping through it and reading the ending, she puts it aside.[116] Although she thinks little of the book and considers it to be "de nulle auttorité," [of no authority], nonetheless it makes her wonder why so many authors, including Matheolus, tend to write "tant de diableries et de vituperes de femmes et leurs condicions" [so many insulting and contemptuous things about women and their qualities].[117] In considering this question, Christine grows confused and disturbed. She attempts to recall anything in the descriptions of women that she has read that she can identify with, comparing them both to her own lived experience and to what she knows of the experience of other women. As she recounts:

---

[115] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 617. While Christine de Pizan does not identify the book by title, her description suggests that it is Matheolus's *Lamentations*, which Rosalind Brown-Grant summarizes as: "a thirteenth-century tirade against marriage in which the author vilifies women for making men's lives a misery." Rosalind Brown-Grant, "Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*," by Christine de Pizan, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xvii.

[116] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 617.

[117] *Cité*, 1.1 pp. 617-18.

Ces choses penssant a par moy tres parfondement, je pris a examiner moy meismes et mes meurs comme femme naturelle, et semblablement discoutoye des autres femmes que j'ay hantees: tant princepces, grandes dames, moyennes et petites a grans foison, qui de leurs graces m'ont dit de leurs privités et estroittes penssees, sçavoir mon a jugier en conscience et sans faveur ce ce puet estre vray ce que tant de notables hommes, et uns et autres, en tesmongnent. Mais nonobstant que pour chose que je y peusse cognoistre, / tant longuement y sceusse viser ne espluchier, je ne apperceusse ne cogneusse tels jugemens estre vrays encontre les naturelz meurs et condicions femenines[118]

[Thinking about these things very deeply, I began to examine myself and my customs as a natural woman, and similarly considered the other women that I knew: so many princesses and ladies of high, middle, and low estates in great abundance, who of their goodwill had told me their secrets and private thoughts, to know for certain and to judge fairly and impartially if what so many famous men had attested could be true. But although I looked very long for something I could recognize, know, see, or pick out there, I could neither perceive nor understand such judgments to be true when compared to natural female conduct and ways of being.]

This is not the automatic process of emotional identification that the Princess experiences when admonished by the Love and Fear of Our Lord. Rather, Christine is deliberately trying to find a match between her own experience of what it means to be a woman and the things she has read about women, but despite strenuous effort, she comes up short.

In a last-ditch effort to force herself to identify with these misogynist images, she talks herself into the idea that the texts they come from must be correct because their authors are men of authority. Instead of relieving her, however, this forced attempt at identification sends her into a state of misery.[119] She feels a "grant desplaisance et tristesse

---

[118] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 618-19.

[119] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 619. Her suffering here, as many have noted, comes from her choice to put the authority of these men over the authority of her own experience. See, for example, Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*, 51; Laura Kathryn McRae, "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing in Christine de Pisan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*," *Romanic Review* 82, no. 4 (November 1, 1991): 420–21, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/interpretation-acts-reading-writing-christine-de/docview/1290879238/se-2?accountid=14512. De Pizan herself suggests this reading when Christine states that: "m'en rapportoye plus au jugement d'autruy que ad ce que moy

de couraige en deprisant moy meismes et tout le sexe femenin, si comme ce ce fust monstre en nature" [a great displeasure and sorrow of heart in despising myself and all of the female sex, as though it was monstrous in nature].[120] She begins to think of herself as though she is one of the vicious women of misogynist fantasy, and the result is a profound sense of sorrow and self-loathing. This is unlike the princess's self-criticism in the *Trois vertus*, which is grounded in a true sense of her own failings and makes her determined to better herself. It is unlike the overwhelming angst at the state of the world that plagues Christine's sleep in the *Chemin de lonc estude*, which is based in a realistic perception of contemporary political chaos. What Christine has internalized from reading Matheolus and other misogynist authors is a lesson with no value to her life. It is not a truth about women's fundamental nature. It is a misconception, an error brought on by her determination to apply to her life a work in which she can see no reflection of herself.[121]

Indeed, as Glenda McLeod notes, if Matheolus's text is read according to the principles of Biblical exegesis (literally, allegorically, tropologically, and anagogically), it fails on every level to convey truths that cohere with reality or with Catholic articles of

---

meismes en sentoye et savoye." [I recalled the judgments of others more than that which I myself felt and knew]. *Cité*, 1.1 p. 619.

[120] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 620.

[121] Indeed, as Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint put it, what Christine is suffering from here is a kind of "loss of her self-identity," which she must recollect and recover over the course of the work by presenting the historical achievements of women. In building the city of Ladies from these stories, she also offers a "place for both the recollection and redescription of women's history and the recovery and restoration of their identity." Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint, "Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan's *Cité Des Dames*," in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 207–10, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015025281802.

faith.[122] If women were created as fundamentally depraved, then this calls into question not

only Christine's acquaintance with good women, but also God's goodness, the sanctity of

the Virgin Mary, and the incorporation of women into the community of saints.[123] Hence it

is no surprise that, after reading Matheolus, Christine prays to God to help her understand

how her faith can allow her to believe in God's perfection while also believing that God

made a mistake in creating women.[124] By taking a work like Matheolus's, incompatible with

even a literal view of reality, to be true, the reader risks blundering into theological

error.[125]

Failing to identify with a work, in the sense that it expresses nothing that the reader

has experienced to be true, can thus potentially serve as a sign that its lessons are not

particularly relevant to one's life.[126] Certainly there is nothing in Matheolus's misogynist,

---

[122] Glenda McLeod, "Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de La Cité Des Dames*," in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 40–41.

[123] McLeod, 40–41.

[124] *Cité*, 1.1 pp. 620-621.

[125] Indeed, as Rosalind Brown-Grant argues, is it from "the brink of theological error" that Christine (and the female reader) must be saved by the intervention of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 154. Margaret W. Ferguson likewise notes how de Pizan raises a "theological problem" by suggesting "that the words of misogynist authorities . . . have led her into a state of sin in which she is becoming deaf to God's Word." Margaret W. Ferguson, "An Empire of Her Own: Literacy as Appropriation in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*," in *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 197. See also McLeod's argument that: "when Christine reads Matheolus, doubts the love of God, and prays, she has been converted to a wrong belief. The prayer that she utters is a sharp judgment against the ethics (or lack thereof) in Matheolus's text." McLeod, "Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics," 40.

[126] One could potentially choose to read a work that seems superficially irrelevant allegorically: indeed, Christine de Pizan make extensive use of allegory in her own works and was interested in teaching readers to interpret allegorically. On this topic, see: Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 27–29. As

misogamist treatise that resembles the real women Christine knows. The problem is that

texts like Matheolus's are not the only ones that offer up images of femininity that are likely

to be alien to female readers. As Christine reflects,

> Et nom mie seulement un ou deux ne cestuy Matheolus, qui entre des livres n'a
> aucune reputacion et qui traitte en maniere de trufferie mais generaument aucques
> en tous traittiez philosophes, pouettes, tous orateurs desquelz les noms seroit
> longue chose, semble que tour parlent par une meismes bouche et tous accordent
> une semblable conclusion, determinant les meurs femenins enclins et plains de tous
> les vices.[127]

> [And not only one or two nor only this Matheolus, who among the books has no
> reputation and who deals in matters of deceit, but in general almost all of the
> treatises of philosophers, of poets, of all of the orators whose names would take long
> to list, seem to speak with one mouth and all agree on the same conclusion,
> determining women's ways to be inclined towards, and full of, all vices.]

A purely anti-feminist diatribe is likely to have little value for female readers. But what

about influential political treatises, like John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, which uncritically

repeats misogynist excerpts from Theophrastus's *Liber aureolus de nuptiis*?[128] What about

the works of Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* was a vital source for Christine de Pizan's writing,

but many of whose works contain, as Christine notes, content demeaning to women?[129]

McLeod points out, however, a work that fails to ring true on the literal level may have problems on
other exegetical levels as well. McLeod, "Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics," 40–41.

[127] Cité, 1.1 p. 618.

[128] Eric Hicks, "A Mirror for Misogynists: John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (8.II) in the Translation of
Denis Foulechat (1372)," in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens:
University of Georgia Press, 1992), 78–79. Hicks notes that this work, whose imagery of the body
politic directly or indirectly influenced de Pizan's own writings on the subject, "embodies perhaps
more than any other work Christine might have read those complex tendencies of medieval
'wisdom' which led her to wonder," as she does in the opening of the *Cité*, why so many learned
men wrote such "wicked" things about women. Hicks, 78–79.

[129] *Cité* 1.9 pp. 646-47. Christine specifically asks Reason why Ovid "tant blasma femmes en
plusieurs de ses dictiez" [criticized women so much in many of his works], citing his "De l'art /
d'amours" [*Ars Amatoria*/The Art of Love] and his "De remede d'amours" [*Remedia Amoris*/Remedy
of Love] as examples of works where he does so.

Even Aristotle, the "supreme philosophical authority in the later Middle Ages," whom de

Pizan holds in high regard, is partly responsible for the view of women as defective males

that she condemns in the *Cité des dames*.[130]

Regardless of the source, whether collections of moral sayings seeded with

antifeminist commonplaces,[131] serious philosophical works that take a dim view of women,

or popular works such as the *Roman de la Rose,* with its aggressive citation of misogynist

materials,[132] misogyny has the potential to corrupt the pictures that writers paint of

women and to push female readers away. If male writers consider female subjects to be

---

[130] Rosalind Brown-Grant, Glossary for *The Book of the City of Ladies*, by Christine de Pizan, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 248; Rosalind Brown-Grant, Notes on *The Book of the City of Ladies*, by Christine de Pizan, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 241n5; *Cité*, 1.9 p. 649.

[131] An example of one such work, which almost certainly contributed to de Pizan's sense of the ubiquity of authorial misogyny, is Guillaume de Tignonville's *Dits moraulx*, a compilation of "wise" sayings and biographical sketches that was one of Christine de Pizan's key sources for her *Epistre Othea*. Among its excerpts, the *Dits moraulx* included inaccurate, and inaccurately attributed, quotations from various sources, a number of which quotations were misogynist in nature (including, for example, crude anti-woman statements attributed to Socrates). Karen Green, "On Translating Christine de Pizan as Philosopher," in *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, Disputatio 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 125–26, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325. As Karen Green notes, the misogynist remarks in the *Dits moraulx* "add to our appreciation of the sort of text to which Christine was responding when she wrote *Le Livre de la cité des dames*, and her other works defending women." Green, 126.

[132] Christine de Pizan was a staunch critic of the *Roman de la Rose*, as can be clearly seen in the *Querelle de la Rose*, an epistolary exchange between de Pizan and several male clerks on the merits and morality of the work (or the lack thereof). Christine de Pizan was adamant in condemning the work for its obscene language, its questionable moral influence, and its defamation of women. For further analysis of de Pizan's perspective on the *Rose*, see: Kevin Brownlee, "Discourses of the Self: Christine de Pizan and the *Rose*," *Romanic Review* 79, no. 1 (1988): 199–221, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/discourses-self-christine-de-pizan-rose/docview/1290863055/se-2?accountid=14512; Alastair Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The Roman de La Rose and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Marilynn Desmond, "The *Querelle de La Rose* and the Ethics of Reading," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 167–80; Helen Solterer, "Christine's Way: The *Querelle du Roman de la rose* and the Ethics of a Political Response," in *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 151–75.

fundamentally deficient or depraved, or if they see an advantage to presenting them in this

way, then the portraits of women they paint will be pictures of inferiority: vice that comes

easily to women and virtue that is an exception. The flawed ideas about women

exemplified by these images will both taint the lessons they teach and make it harder for

female readers to find elements of the work that resonate with their lives.[133]

Indeed, in her critique of the *Roman de la Rose* in the *Querelle de la Rose* (Debate of

the Rose), de Pizan expresses a sense of how misogyny can infuse itself a writer's work and

influence its message and its characters. While outlining her complaints against the *Rose*,

de Pizan notes how excessively Jean de Meun criticizes women, even putting this critique in

the mouths of characters that should be, in light of their stated aims, encouraging the

protagonist to look favorably on women. Thus she condemns how:

> . . . excessivement, impettueusement et tres nonveritablement il accuse, blasme et
> diffame femmes de pluseurs tres grans vices et leurs meurs tesmoigne estre plains
> de toute perversité ; et par tant de repliques et auques en tous personnages ne s'en
> puet saouler. Car se dire me vouléz que ce face le Jaloux comme passionné, je ne
> sçay entendre qu'il apperteigne a l'office de Genius, qui tant recommande et ennorte
> que l'en couche avecques elles sans delaisser l'uevre que il tant loue ; et cil mesmes
> dist sur tous personnages moult de grans vituperes de elles, et dist de fait : «Fuiéz !
> fuiéz ! fuiéz le serpent venimeux !» — et puis se dist que on les continue sans
> delaissier. Cy a malement grant contradiction de commander a fuir ce que il veult
> que on suive et suivir ce que il veult que on fuie.

> [. . . excessively, impetuously, and very untruthfully he accuses, blames, and defames
> women for many great vices and proclaims their ways to be full of every perversity:
> and through so much repetition and nearly all of the characters he cannot be
> satisfied. For although you might like to tell me that the Jealous Husband does so
> because he is overwhelmed with emotion, I cannot understand how it pertains to
> the office of Genius, who so often recommends and exhorts that one sleep with
> women without ceasing the act that he praises so much; yet he, himself, more than
> all of the other characters, so viciously criticizes women, and actually says: "Flee!

---

[133] For more on de Pizan's ideas about the degree to which an author has a moral responsibility for
the messages promoted by his characters, see: Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The Roman de La Rose and
Vernacular Hermeneutics*, 229–30. See also: Brownlee, "Discourses of the Self," 216.

Flee! Flee the venomous serpent!"—and then he says that one should endlessly pursue them. It's a massive contradiction to command one to flee that which he wishes one would pursue, and to pursue that which he wishes one would flee.].[134]

Here, she implies that Jean de Meun's misogynist excesses stem from a kind of need that he is unable to fulfill: the word she uses, "saouler," can connote the kind of satisfaction that comes from eating or drinking one's fill.[135] He hungers to criticize women, to the point that this sentiment infiltrates nearly every one of his characters, even those in whom misogyny would be unseemly or incongruous.[136] And in these corrupted characters, who spout misogynist commonplaces or embody misogynist stereotypes, women can neither see a reflection of themselves, nor learn any accurate lessons about their lives. Misogyny has tainted every aspect of the work.

Jean de Meun's example might seem fairly extreme. But the fact that authorial misogyny can bleed into an author's characters and alter the messages they express suggests that even subtle misogynist sentiments can twist a work's imagery and push female readers away. Even in less overtly misogynist works, feminine figures may be sidelined, subordinated, or ignored—their lives located in a narrative, historical, or philosophical framework that is primarily interested in the lives of men. Consider, for example, the example of Dido—the powerful, politically savvy, reigning queen of Carthage. One could easily imagine a variety of ways in which a woman might see herself in this model. But as Marilynn Desmond notes in her analysis of Christine de Pizan's treatment of

---

[134] Christine de Pizan, letter "a moult souffisant et sçavant personne, maistre Jehan Johannez, secretaire du roy nostre sire," in *Le Débat sur le* Roman de la Rose, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1996), 16–17.

[135] Robert Martin, "saouler, verbe," in *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020), http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer; Algridas Julien Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, "soûler (v.)," in *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français* (Paris: Larousse, 2007).

[136] de Pizan to "maistre Jehan Johannez," 16–17.

this figure, even male authors who praise Dido, such as Boccaccio, may frame this praise in

a way that betrays an "implicit misogyny." And in historically focused works, Dido tends to

disappear, erased "by the masculine bias of textual traditions" that remove her from "the

meaningful structures of medieval history" because she left no male descendants, and thus

could not be part of the "masculine genealogy" around which history was constructed.[137]

The result is that, "In the textual realities of late medieval humanism . . . for the female

reader to recognize herself in the 'other' of the masculine text is to risk erasure."[138] Even a

noble and powerful female figure like Dido is likely to be ignored, contained, her strength

couched in terms of masculinity, and her story subordinated to that of the men around her.

And this limits the good that female readers can take from her image.

Women could, it is true, see themselves in the *men* of the works they read: in the

figures of their authors or the male models they present. Christine does so to great benefit

when reading the *Consolation of Philosophy*. But doing so can pose problems if the work's

messages are excessively informed by misogyny. For a woman to see herself in the Amant

(Lover) of the *Romance of the Rose*, for example, would be to see herself in a man who

learns how to manipulate and violate women.[139] A woman like Christine might relate to the

image of an author as an individual devoted to study, but then be jarred out of

---

[137] Marilynn Desmond, "Christine de Pizan's Feminist Self-Fashioning and the Invention of Dido," in *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, New Edition, Medieval Cultures 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 223, 204–6, 208.

[138] Desmond, 223.

[139] In "The *Querelle de la Rose* and the Ethics of Reading," Marilynn Desmond argues that one of Christine de Pizan's key objections to the *Roman de la Rose* is the way it promotes, legitimizes, eroticizes, and even provides a guide to violence against women, in particular the abuse of women by their husbands. Desmond, "The *Querelle de La Rose* and the Ethics of Reading," 172–76. For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's perspective on the ways a work's defamation of women can result in harm to both women and the broader public, see: Solterer, "Christine's Way," 152–53, 157–58.

identification by his misogynist misconceptions. Believing herself to be a strong woman, she might look for representations of strength and find them only in men. This constant denial of identification can wear a reader down.

Indeed, even though female readers can learn from misogynist works, the affective burden of coping with textual hostility towards women is not an insignificant one. Reflecting on misogynist works and trying to identify with them leaves Christine utterly miserable, stuck in a "dollente pensee ainsi que j'estoye, la teste baissiee comme personne honteuse, les yeulx plains de larmes, tenant ma main / soubz ma joe acoudee sur le pommel de ma chayere" [state of sorrowful thought, my head bowed like one who is ashamed, eyes full of tears, holding my hand beneath my cheek, leaning on the arm of my chair]: so distraught that she cannot resume her studies.[140] And if "generalement aucques en tous traittiez philosophes, pouettes, tous orateurs" [in general almost all of the treatises of philosophers, of poets, of all of the orators] exhibit some form of misogynist misconceptions, the result is a "field of letters" which persistently sets up barriers to keep women out.[141]

How, then, can a writer work against these limitations? How one welcome female readers to learn from one's works? The answer may lie, first and foremost, in cultivating understanding. As Christine de Pizan suggests in her portion of the *Querelle de la Rose*, one of the key reasons Jean de Meun depicts women in such an offensive way is because he does not know enough about them to depict them accurately. As she states:

---

[140] *Cité*, 1.4 p. 621. As Desmond notes, "Christine's specific construction as a female reader—and her reaction to her reading as a woman—dramatizes the dangers of misogynistic texts for the woman reader, since it depicts the paralysis of self-hatred that results." Desmond, "Christine de Pizan's Feminist Self-Fashioning and the Invention of Dido," 199.

[141] *Cité*, 1.1 p. 618.

. . . tant superfluement et | laidement parla des femmes mariees qui si deçoivent leurs maris — duquel estat n'en pot sçavoir par experience et tant en parla generaument . . . Mais vrayement puis que en general ainsi toutes blasma, de croire par ceste raison suis contrainte que onques n'ot accointance ne hantise de femme honnourable ne vertueuse, mais par pluseurs femmes dissolues et de male vie hanter — comme font communement les luxurieux —, cuida ou faingny savoir que toutes telles feussent, car d'autres n'avoit congnoissance. Et se seullement eust blasmé les deshonnestes et conseillié elles fuir, bon enseignement et juste seroit. Mais non ! ains sans exception toutes les accuse.[142]

["he spoke so superficially and spitefully about married women who deceive their husbands—a state about which he could not have known anything through experience, and therefore spoke in such a general manner . . . But in truth, since he blamed all women in general, I am forced to believe for that very reason that he never had any acquaintance or relation with honorable or virtuous women, but rather, by keeping company with many dissolute women of wicked ways—as lustful men commonly do—he believed, or pretended to know, that all women were this way; for he had no knowledge of any others. And if he had only reproached indecent women and advised that one flee them, it would have been a good and just teaching. But no! Instead, he accuses all women without exception."][143]

She goes on to cite examples of virtuous women whose existence would have been obvious had Jean de Meun simply looked about him, or read carefully enough in the Bible or in works of history.[144] And in anticipating the argument that she is biased towards women because she is a woman, de Pizan declares:

. . . veritablement mon motif n'est simplement fors soustenir pure verité, si comme je la sçay de certaine science estre au contraire des dictes choses de moy nyees ; et de tant comme voirement suis femme, plus puis tesmoingnier en ceste partie que cellui qui n'en a l'experience, ains parle par devinailles et d'aventure.[145]

["in truth my motivation stems from nothing other than simply advocating pure truth, since by proven knowledge I know this truth to be contrary to the statements

---

[142] de Pizan to "maistre Jehan Johannez," 18.

[143] Christine de Pizan to Jean de Montreuil, June-July 1401, in *Debate of the* Romance of the Rose, ed. and trans. David F. Hult (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 58.

[144] de Pizan to de Montreuil, June-July 1401, trans. Hult, 58-59.

[145] de Pizan to "maistre Jehan Johannez," 19.

I have refuted. But insofar as I am in fact a woman, I am better suited to attest to these matters than he who, not having had this experience, speaks instead through conjecture and in a haphazard manner."][146]

Here, then, she declares explicitly that those who write inaccurately about women—who construct misogynist texts in which the vast majority of women have difficulty seeing themselves—do so because they are ignorant, both of women's experiences and the experience of being a woman.[147] In contrast, she argues, those who understand women's experiences are particularly qualified to write accurately about them.[148]And the more that a writer understands: the more she lives as a woman, or speaks to women, or reads stories about women's lives written by those who have lived them, the broader her knowledge becomes and the more able she is to write works with which a diverse group of women may identify.

---

[146] de Pizan to de Montreuil, June-July 1401, trans. Hult, 60. As Alastair Minnis argues : "Such passages present Christine as claiming the authority of experience. She responds from her own particular subject-position as a woman, Pierre Col is assured, and hence in this case can speak 'verité de certainne science' ['the truth from certain knowledge']." Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The Roman de La Rose and Vernacular Hermeneutics*, 217, quoting Christine de Pizan, "Letter 'A maistre Pierre Col, secretaire du roy nostre sire,'" in *Le Débat sur le* Roman de la Rose, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1996), 149; and Christine de Pizan et al., *La Querelle de La Rose : Letters and Documents*, ed. and trans., Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures 199 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 52–53.

[147] For further analysis of the way Christine de Pizan presents her experience as a woman as an authorization for her own writing, see: Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*, 36–37.

[148] One need not necessarily, as she clarifies in a later letter in the debate, have experienced something personally in order to "parler proprement" (speak properly) about it. Christine de Pizan, Letter 'A maistre Pierre Col, secretaire du roy nostre sire,' in *Le Débat sur le* Roman de la Rose, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1996), 120. As she states, it is possible to describe things beyond human perception, and for a man of understanding to comprehend the effects of love. de Pizan, 120. That being said, her prior letter makes it clear that even if experience is not required for writing well about a topic, having it (or at least doing one's homework!) certainly makes one more qualified to write about it than one who lacks this experience.

This is what Christine de Pizan strives to do. By drawing from her experiences as a

woman and her knowledge of other women's experiences, she works to paint literary

portraits in which female readers can see themselves, and to use these portraits to lead her

readers on guided journeys of learning and personal growth.[149] In doing so, she works to

open up opportunities for them: for identification, for education, and for gaining new

perspectives. She cannot, it is true, redress the wrongs of every work that shuts women out.

But by providing her readers with access points, grounded in the realities of their lives, she

can open a space in the field of letters, however small, in which they may learn.[150]

---

[149] As Mary Ann C. Case puts it, Christine de Pizan works to tell the stories of the marginalized and give authority to their experiences: "With her privileged access to the experience of being a woman and to the voices of other women, she can provide useful, concrete correctives to the misogynists' over-generalizations," including not only the struggles of elite women, but also the voices of poor, abused, and otherwise marginalized women. Mary Anne C. Case, "Christine de Pizan and the Authority of Experience," in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 74.

[150] One final option for deriving good from these misogynist texts might be to read in terms of "antiphrasis," treating misogynist texts as though they mean the exact opposite of what they say. This is how Reason recommends that Christine read them in the *Livre de la cité des dames*, and while her advice may be, as Susan Schibanoff argues, a bit "outrageous," it still contains the idea that women *ought* to reread and reinterpret texts in line with their "own experiences and knowledge." *Cité* 1.2 p. 624; Susan Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 97–98, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015038902394. Christine de Pizan herself demonstrates this method of reading by virtue of the way she reinterprets the stories of women in the *Livre de la cité des dames*. Reading in this way essentially allows women to transform what they read into material with which they can identify, claiming the masculine prerogative to "create texts in their own images." Schibanoff, 98. This method of reading is indeed a valuable one, and one that Christine de Pizan strives to teach her readers. Schibanoff's essay provides an excellent overview of the topic of de Pizan's tactical rewriting and reinterpretation of her sources, which has been discussed by many other scholars as well. See, for example: Blanchard, "Compilation et légitimation"; Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 27–93. My focus here, however, is more on the ways that Christine de Pizan works to make this kind of aggressive rereading less necessary for her readers by writing works with which they can identify. By breaking down some of the initial affective barriers to women's learning in her *Livre de la cité des dames*, she can welcome them into her text, and once they are there, teach them methods of reading and rereading, such as reading via antiphrasis, that will enable them to derive good from other texts as well.

In the following chapter, I will examine the particular strategies she uses to do so. My focus will be on her two principal didactic works for women: the *Livre de la Cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*. Each of these works, in a different way, can be understood as an experiment in facilitating readerly identification. And by analyzing the strategies de Pizan uses for helping her female readers to identify with her models, one can gain insight into the ways that she transforms her observations about a particular reading phenomenon into a coherent pedagogy.

Chapter 2

"A tout le colliege femenin": Identification and Inclusion in the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*

Identification, as discussed in the previous chapter, is triggered by a moment of recognition. Any detail in which a reader perceives some aspect of her life can function as a point of access that can help her find her way into the text and help the lessons of the text find their way into her mind. In order to facilitate identification, it is therefore important to give one's readers as many access points as possible—to provide literary models that are specific and realistic enough that readers can see themselves in them, but varied enough that they can encompass a broad range of readers and of experiences. These are the kinds of models that Christine de Pizan provides her readers in the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des Trois Vertus*.[1]

In this chapter, I will analyze how Christine de Pizan presents these models, the methods she applies to enable readers to identify with them, the lessons she seeks to teach her readers, and the ways her approaches to readerly identification differ between these works. In doing so, I seek both to characterize the identification-based pedagogical

---

[1] As Sylvia Nagel argues, by representing so many contemporary women's voices in dialogue in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*, Christine de Pizan responds to the need for women to "create a female voice and female identity outside the pre-existing social and rhetorical models created and imposed by men, a female voice and female identity linked to actual female experience. The only choice women have is to reproduce their speech mimetically, that is, to discover a new mimesis of women's experience." Sylvia Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 505. By offering such a wide variety of accurately rendered female figures and voices, Christine de Pizan gives her readers opportunities for identification: "different women as figures of identification for the women-readers of the book offer a wide spectrum of models of discourse . . . In this manner Christine offers with these women the possibility for her readers to identify their own experiences and their own identities with them by mimesis." Nagel, 514.

strategies that Christine de Pizan applies in these works and to analyze the ways she uses these strategies to open up learning opportunities for her readers.

Le Livre de la cité des dames

The *Livre de la cité des dames*, the first didactic work for women I will be analyzing, is structured as a mix of a dream-vision and a biographical catalogue.[2] The work's central character, and a potent potential subject of readerly identification, is de Pizan's narrator and authorial persona, Christine. When we first meet Christine, she is sitting in her room, diligently studying the works of various authors, as is her custom. In search of some light reading, she peruses a book by Matheolus, but her disgust at the work's depiction of women leads her first to reflect on why so many male authors are so demeaning towards women, and then to persuade herself that women really are as terrible as misogynists say they are.[3] Sunk into a state of despair and self-loathing, she is visited by a vision of three allegorical women: Raison [Reason], Droitture [Rectitude], and Justice, who arrive to correct her misconceptions about women and to help her build a city in the "field of letters" [champ des escriptures] where all virtuous women can live free from masculine slander.[4]

---

[2] Rosalind Brown-Grant, "Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*," by Christine de Pizan, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xvii.

[3] Cité, 1.1, pp. 616-21.

[4] *Cité*, 1.8 p. 639; 1.2, pp. 621-25; 1.3, pp. 625-30. I say "virtuous women" as a form of shorthand, as de Pizan's criteria for admittance to her city vary a bit each time she mentions them. The first time she discusses which women will be allowed in her city is when Reason states that the city will be a place: "en laquelle n'abitera fors toutes dames de renommee et femmes dignes de loz: car a celles ou vertu ne sera trouvee, les murs de nostre cité serent forclos" [in which no-one will live except all ladies of good reputation and praiseworthy women; for to those in whom virtue cannot be found, the walls of our city will be closed]. *Cité*, 1.3 p. 630. Here, she links virtue to praise and social recognition, with the implication (as she explicitly states in the *Trois vertus*) that moral behavior

The building materials that Christine will use to construct her city are stories of virtuous women, and the inhabitants of the city will be all women of virtue, past, present, and future.[5]

As a biographical catalogue of virtuous women from throughout history, The *Book of the City of Ladies* is full of images in which women might see themselves. And it is through these images, and how she presents them, that de Pizan invites her readers to learn the lessons of the work. The central lesson that she seeks to teach her readers is, as mentioned

will lead to a good reputation and that a prudent woman will take care to preserve her reputation. *Trois vertus* 1.2 p. 28. Pizan does not, however, make the fact of praise a condition for entry— merely the possession of qualities worthy of praise. This is for good reason, since so many of the women she would like to welcome into her city have been unfairly slandered. *Cité*, 1.3, pp. 629-30. She also admits women who are imperfect (as all women are), provided they love virtue. Thus, she states later that her city is open to all "Tres redoubtees et excellens princepes honnourees de France et de tout paÿs, et toutes dames, damoyselles, et generaument toutes femmes qui amastes, amez et améres vertus et bonnes meurs, tant celles qui sont trespassees comme les presentes et celles a avenir" [Most revered, excellent, and esteemed princesses of France and of all countries, and to all ladies, maidens, and generally all women who loved, love, and will love virtue and good conduct: those of the past just as much as those of the present and those of the future]. *Cité*, 2.69 p. 970. She ends by combining her previous criteria, stating that her city is one "en laquelle toutes celles qui amez vertus, gloire et loz poves estre hebergees, tant les passees dammes, commes les presentes et celles a avenir, car pout toute dame honnourable est faitte et fondee" [in which all women who love virtue, glory, and praise can be sheltered, women of the past as much as those of the present and those of the future]. For more on the importance of reputation and honor in Christine de Pizan's works, see: Meg Lota Brown, "Reputation as Rectitude in *The Book of the Three Virtues*," in *Au Champ Des Escriptures: IIIe Colloque International Sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 Juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 447–59; and Thelma Fenster, "La fama, la femme, et la Dame de la Tour : Christine de Pizan et la médisance," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 461–77.

[5] Based on the qualities of the women in the City of Ladies, as well as de Pizan's discussion of various virtues in other works, I understand the virtues that "women who love virtue" possess to include reason, rectitude, and justice, as well as piety, prudence, loyalty, honesty, steadfastness, courage, morality, circumspection, discretion, moderation, modesty, chastity, compassion, inventiveness, and other merits, innate and cultivated, of similar kinds. As Margarete Zimmermann argues, virtue can also imply a kind of "réalisation de soi" (self-realization). Margarete Zimmermann, "Les *Trois Vertus* de Christine de Pizan. Une lecture politique du concept de la vertu," in *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009* (Florence: Alinea, 2013), 117.

above, to recognize both their own virtue and the capacity of all women to live virtuous

lives.[6] Succeeding in this will help her to fulfill the work's other main goals: helping women

defend themselves from masculine slander and building them a space in the literary field

where they can be safe and happy.[7]

In order to accomplish her aims, she makes use of two key strategies. The first is

presenting Christine as both a humanized figure in whom readers are invited to see

themselves and as a student who learns, throughout the work, how to recognize women's

virtue. By dramatizing Christine's learning process, de Pizan invites her readers to follow

along with her and experience the process of learning as she does.[8] The second strategy

involves her presenting images of women who exemplify varied virtues and working to

---

[6] See Brabant and Brint's argument: "In the *Cité des Dames*, virtues are the means by which barriers are overcome. Although the shape of these virtues may alter, she insists, all people, of all time, class, and gender are capable of living virtuously." Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint, "Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan's *Cité Des Dames*," in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 209, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015025281802.

[7] *Cité*, 1.3, pp. 629-30.

[8] In essence, the Christine-narrator can be understood as a vehicle for "*protrepsis*," or "the literary modeling of ethical transformation in a main character who is also the narrator of the work." Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 10. A *protreptic* work, as Eleanor Johnson explains, "teaches ethics by facilitating identification between its reader and its narrator who is also the protagonist of an ethical quest for truth." Johnson, 9–10. When readers are invited to identify with Christine, they are likewise invited to learn as she learns. A number of scholars have commented on the Christine-narrator's status as a kind of model for readers to follow or to emulate. As Lori J. Walters notes: "In all her texts that include autobiographical passages, in particular those dating from 1400–05, the period when she composed the *Chemin*, the author actively transforms her lived, experiential self into a series of more virtuous, exemplary selves." Lori J. Walters, "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom: The *Chemin de lonc estude* in the Queen's Manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 4431," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 5, no. 2 (2016): 230, https://doi.org/10.1353/dph.2016.0013. See also: Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152; and Allyson Carr, *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change*, PDF (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 206–8.

help readers identify with these women. In providing these images, de Pizan encourages her readers to perceive the virtues they share with them and thus to come to an awareness of their own virtue.[9]

I will begin by examining the figure of Christine, and how de Pizan's depiction of her facilitates readerly identification. Perhaps most immediately and prominently, Christine invites the identification of readers because she is presented as a kind of figure for the reader. In the opening of the work, one sees Christine sitting in her room, surrounded by books. Growing weary of difficult study, she puts aside the book she has been reading and looks around for a new one to occupy her mind. Noticing Matheolus's book in a pile of borrowed texts, she opens it and begins to read.[10] The result is a sort of *mise en abyme*[11] as the reader, starting to read or hear a book read, encounters the image of another reader

---

[9] As Margarete Zimmermann argues: "En effet, la notion de vertu telle qu'elle est appréhendée dans *La Cité des Dames* et dans son prolongement pragmatique, *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, évoque une libération, un encouragement, une vie assumée et fondée sur la conscience de sa propre valeur, même si au niveau réel et pragmatique il ne peut y avoir de liberté en dehors des limites imposées par la classe sociale et le sex au Moyen Âge tardif." [In effect, the notion of virtue as it is understood in *The City of Ladies* and in its pragmatic extension, *The Book of the Three Virtues*, evokes a liberation, an encouragement, a life undertaken and founded on the cognizance of its own value, even though on the real and pragmatic level, one can have no freedom from the limits imposed by social class and sex in the late Middle Ages]. Zimmermann, "Une lecture politique," 123.
[10] *Cité*, 1.1, pp. 616-617.

[11] For an interesting analysis of what happens when readers encounter an image of readers reading, see: Jean E. Jost, "Chaucer's Literate Characters Reading Their Texts: Interpreting Infinite Regression, or the Narcissus Syndrome," in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 171–217. Her main argument is that when authors depict characters in the act of reading, it creates a kind of infinite regression (a literary *mise en abyme*), wherein the reader recognizes him/herself in the image of a character reading a work of literature and potentially recognizing him/herself in that work of literature. The result is a movement of the reader, via "recognition of the self in a textual other," from the text, to the character, to the depths of the self. Jost, 172. Depictions of reading characters thus both portray and facilitate readerly identification and self-reflection. Jost, 210–11.

putting down one book and starting a new one.[12] Like a reader encountering the work for

the first time, Christine is also new to the material: both Matheolus's specific words and the

broader lessons about feminine nature that will be presented to her in the *Livre de la cité*

des dames. The Three Virtues visit her, after all, in order to teach her truths about women

that she either does not know or has forgotten.[13] Rather than a figure of authority who

explains everything from a point of mastery, Christine is thus depicted as a learner.[14] The

situating of Christine in a position similar to that of the reader immediately opens up

possibilities for identification, as does the realistic human detail with which she is

rendered.

In the opening of the work, we see Christine situated in an environment that is

familiar to her, and we are given a window into her daily life, her habits, and her

relationship with the people and objects around her. As she discusses:

Selonc le maniere que j'ay en usaige, et a quoy est disposé le exercice de ma vie: c'est

---

[12] De Pizan's readers, it is true, might not have been engaged in the same kind of silent, solitary reading as Christine. While this form of reading was growing increasingly common in the later Middle Ages, the default was still reading aloud in groups. Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–2. And Christine de Pizan did understand her noble readers as being, by and large, exposed to literature in public, social contexts. Deborah McGrady, "Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and Her Readers," in *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 164. The image of a reader beginning a physical book, however, would be present before the eyes and in the experience of the reader or the listener, regardless of whether she held the book herself.

[13] See Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 153.

[14] In *Christine de Pizan and the moral defence of women: Reading beyond gender*, Rosalind Brown-Grant makes note of the way de Pizan places Christine on an equal footing with the work's readers. As she states: "In Christine's dream-vision, she herself features *in propria persona* as a protagonist in her own text when confronted by the three allegorical figures of Raison, Droiture, and Justice following her distress at reading about the alleged wickedness of women in Matheolus's *Lamentations*. Through the use of this fiction, Christine represents herself in the *Cité* as a receiver rather than a dispenser of wisdom, thereby appearing to place herself on the same level as her implied readers." Brown-Grant, 140.

assavoir en la frequentacion d'estude de lettres, un jour comme je fusse seant en ma celle avironne de plusieurs volumes de diverses mateires, mon entendement a celle heure aucques travaillié de reccuillir la pesenteur des sentences de divers aucteurs par moy longue piece estudiés, dreçay mon visaige enssus du livre, deliberant pour celle fois laissier em pais choses soubtilles et m'esbatre et regarder aucune joyeuseté des dist des pouettes.[15]

[One day, in the manner to which I am accustomed, I was sitting in my room surrounded by many volumes on diverse subjects, as the pursuit of learning, via the habitual study of written works, is the way I am inclined to occupy my life. As my mind, at that time, was nearly exhausted from putting together the weighty judgments of various authors over the long time I had spent studying, I lifted my face from my book, deciding to leave complex matters in peace for a while and to amuse myself by reading some pleasant thing in the works of the poets.]

In introducing Christine's activities, de Pizan takes care to emphasize their habitual nature.

The "frequentacion" [habit/practice] of study is Christine's "usaige" [habit/custom]. It is

the activity to which the "exercice" [practice] of her life is naturally "disposé" [inclined].

The result of this is to ground Christine in the mundane; what we are seeing is a portrait of

her everyday life. She is situated in her room, pursuing her usual activities, and when she

finds herself fatigued and in need of rest and entertainment, it is the understandable result

of the hard work she has been doing.[16]

---

[15] *Cité*, 1.1, p. 616.

[16] In her analysis of Christine de Pizan's literary personae, Patrizia Romagnoli likewise comments on the mundanity of Christine de Pizan's self-representation in her works, arguing:

> . . . par l'intermédiare de cette figure fictive, la vie et les déboires quotidiens de Christine trouvent un lieu de convergence et d'expression, de sorte que, existence et écriture se mêlant étroitement, toute une tranche de la vie intime de Christine est appelée à jouer un rôle dans la création de ses oeuvres: mère, elle écrit *Les Enseignements que Christine donne a son filz* (ou *Notables moraux*) ou rend visite à sa fille dans Le Livre du Dit de Poissy; fille, elle se fait surprendre dans son travail par sa mère qui, tout en méconnaissant son activité, la nourrit et la soigne. Celle qui affirme volontiers parler « par expérience », compense son défaut d'autorité en construisant minutieusement son vécu de maniere à le constituer en matériau littéraire."
> [. . . through the mediation of this fictional figure, Christine's life and daily setbacks find a place of convergence and of expression, so that existence and writing can closely mix, and an entire slice of Christine's intimate life is called to play a role in the creation of her works: mother, she writes *The Lessons that Christine Gave to her Son* (or *Notable Morals*) or pays a

After picking up Matheolus's book, Christine begins to read, but she is interrupted by another everyday occurrence: her mother calling her to dinner. As she relates: "Mais regardé ne l'oz moult long espace quant je fus appell´[e] de la bonne mere qui me porta pour prendre la refeccion du soupper dont l'eure estoit ja venue, par quoy proposant le veoir l'endemain, le laissay a celle heure." [But I had not looked at it for long when my good mother called me to come to supper, since it was that time. And so, planning on reading it the next day, I put it aside for the time being].[17] Rather than a disembodied narrative voice or an exalted *auctor* writing from the heights of scholarship, Christine is a character whose experience is shaped by the contingencies of everyday life.[18] She gets tired and hungry, she has habits and goals, and she lives with her mother and thus has to balance her time between her personal desires and her obligations to the people around her.

Even when the fantastical first intervenes in the narrative with the appearance of Reason, Rectitude and Justice, Christine's experience is grounded in the contingencies of her daily life. Before the three Virtues materialize in her room, Christine describes herself as sitting sadly in her chair with her cheek resting on her hand. And when her visitors announce their presence by shining a beam of light into her lap, Christine initially registers

visit to her daughter in *The Book of the Tale of Poissy*; daughter, she is surprised in her work by her mother who, while ignoring her activity, feeds and cares for her. The one who willingly affirms to speak "from experience," compensates for her lack of authority by carefully constructing her experience in such a way as to constitute it as literary material]. Patrizia Romagnoli, "Les formes de la voix: masques et dédoublements du Moi dans l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 76.

[17] *Cité*, 1.1, p. 617.

[18] As Rosalind Brown-Grant notes, "Christine speaks not as an external authorial voice by which to admonish her contemporaries as Petrarch and Boccaccio do, but rather as a model working from within her text for her female reader." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 154.

the experience as strange because it is the wrong time of day for the light of the sun to enter her room. As she states: "soubdainement sus mon giron vy descendre un ray de lumiere si comme se le soleil fust. Et je, qui en lieu obscur estoye, ouquel a celle heure soleil rayer ne peust, tressailly adoncques si come je feusse resveillee de somme." [Suddenly, I saw a ray of light like that of the sun fall upon my lap. And I, who was in a dark place, where the sun could not shine at that hour, started up at once as though I had been woken from sleep].[19] The sudden light of the Virtues is startling, but it is startling because it intervenes in the things Christine knows about her familiar environment, such as what times of day the sun shines in through the window. And when she sees the Virtues standing before her, shining with a light that is bright enough to fill the room, her first reaction is amazement that they managed to get in when the doors and windows were closed: "Lors, se je fus esmerveillee, nul ne demant, considerant sur moy les huys clos et elles le venues." ["As you can imagine, I was full of amazement that they had managed to enter a room whose doors and windows were all closed"].[20]

The effect of these humanizing details is to provide preliminary access points for readers to see themselves in Christine. Certainly, the specifics of her circumstances would not have applied to most of her contemporary female readers. Christine de Pizan is not, after all, credited with being the first professional woman writer in France because her

---

[19] *Cité*, 1.2, p. 621-22.

[20] *Cité*, 1.2 p. 622; Rosalind Brown-Grant, trans., *The Book of the City of Ladies*, By Christine de Pizan (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 8.

career was common.[21] Nor would her lifestyle of study and scholarship have been as

familiar to a courtly audience (whether masculine or feminine) as a clerical one.[22] As a

number of scholars have noted, Christine de Pizan was conscious of her unusual status as

both a female author[23] and as a woman who "had access to books and libraries" and who

"possessed the education and learning that made it possible to make use of them."[24] But the

fact that the details of Christine's daily life are based on, and characterized as, the everyday

experience of a specific human woman nonetheless gives readers opportunities to draw

connections between Christine's experiences and their own. They may not live with their

mothers, but they have certainly experienced themselves as subject to the needs of their

bodies and their families. They may not have access to the books and leisure to pursue a

scholarly lifestyle, but they certainly have their own habits and desires, and they certainly

---

[21] See: Theresa Coletti, "Paths of Long Study: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28, no. 1 (2006): 3, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2006.0025; Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan : Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984), 15.

[22] As Deborah McGrady notes, the miniatures accompanying Christine de Pizan's works tend to depict her courtly audience as "rarely engaged in independent study of books. Instead patrons and courtiers typically appear as listeners of oral readings or spectators before the written artefact." McGrady, "Reading for Authority," 164. This is in contrast to the mix of "clerkly and lay" reading identities that Christine de Pizan uses in her own self-portraits as a reader. McGrady, 157. Coleman likewise argues, based on the prevalence of reading out loud, that the image of a solitary reader would have signified that reader's professional character, and stand out to non-professional readers as unlike their experience. Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*, 171. The grounded humanity of Christine's experiences, however, offers access points to her readers, even if they differ in their material specifics. And as McGrady argues, Christine de Pizan actively encouraged her readers to read, rather than simply listen to, her texts. McGrady, "Reading for Authority," 167–68.

[23] Andrea Tarnowski, "Christine's Selves," in *Desireuse de plus avant enquerre . . . Actes du VIᵉ Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan (Paris, 20-24 juillet 2006), Volume en hommage à James Laidlaw*, ed. Liliane. Dulac et al., Études Christiniennes 11 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 182.

[24] Marilynn Desmond, "Christine de Pizan's Feminist Self-Fashioning and the Invention of Dido," in *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, New Edition, Medieval Cultures 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 197.

have experienced interruptions in their tasks. They occupy their own spaces, with their own schedules, their own knowledge of where things are and what angle the light takes at different times of day. And the very specificity of Christine's experiences, the way they fit into a portrait of a particular person in a particular place, may ironically make them more generally accessible. Readers, after all, are themselves situated in their own particular environments and shaped by their own particular circumstances.[25] Their experience of themselves as people living in a world may resonate with that of a narrator who they view as living within her own.

Christine's detailed narration of her thoughts, feelings, and responses to the objects around her also function both to humanize her and give her readers opportunities for self-recognition. After reading Matheolus's book, for example, she describes step by step the thought process that persuades her that women are vile, the way these thoughts make her feel, and the posture of sorrowful contemplation in which she slumps while she is following this chain of reasoning.[26] She describes her sensory experience in similar detail when Reason first speaks to her: "Ces parolles me dist la dame renommee, a la presence de laquelle je ne sçay lequel de mes scens fu plus entrepris: ou mon ouye, en escoutant ses dignes parolles, ou ma veue, en regardant sa tres grant biauté."[27] [These were the words spoken to me by the renowned lady. I do not know which of my senses was most captivated

---

[25] I feel compelled to note that I am writing this in the spare room at my mother's house, in the second year of the pandemic. It is early spring, a little after three pm, and I can hear the neighbors' chickens clucking outside. Were I to move my laptop a foot to two to the left, the light coming in through the window would make it too bright for me to work. As far as I know, there are no allegorical women present in the room, although they would certainly be welcome.

[26] *Cité*, 1.1-1.2, pp. 617-21.

[27] *Cité*, 1.3, p. 625.

by her presence: whether my hearing, in listening to her dignified words, or my vision, in gazing on her very great beauty]. And after examining the allegorical women further, she describes the conflicting feelings and desires their appearance evokes in her:

> "Si estoye devant elles en estant levee pour leur reverence, les regardant sant mot dire comme personne si entreprise que mot ne scet sonner. Et moult grant admiracion en mon cuer avoye, pensant que povoyent ycelles estre, et moult voulontiers, se je osasse, enqueysse leurs noms, et de leur estre; et quelle estoit la signyffiance des septres differenciés que chacune d'elles en sai main destre tenoit, qui tous estoyent de moult grant richesce, et pourquoy furent la venues. Mais comme je me reputasse non digne d'araisonner en telz demandes si haultes dames comme elles m'aparoyent, n'osasse nullement, ains continuasse adés sur elles mon regart, demie espoventee et demie asseuree par les parolles que ouyes avoye qui m'ourent gitee hors de ma premiere pensee."[28]

> [I stood up before them out of respect, looking at them without saying anything, like a person who is so astonished that she doesn't know how to speak a word. And I felt great wonder in my heart, considering who they were, and I would have gladly (if I dared) asked their names and their estates, and why they had come here, and what the significance was of the different scepters, all of great richness, that each carried in her right hand. But because I didn't consider myself worthy enough to ask such questions of such noble women as they appeared to be, I did not dare, but continued to stare at them, half afraid and half reassured by the words I had heard that had cast me from my previous thoughts.]

These detailed descriptions of Christine's personal experience allow her readers to see how she thinks and feels, what hurts her or awakens her curiosity, what it is like mentally, emotionally, and physically to read Matheolus's book or to see these women in her room and react to their presence. And once again, these details give them access points, experiences in which they might recognize their own. Maybe they have heard women slandered and felt shame. Maybe they have stood in tongue-tied silence before a person they admired. Maybe they have found themselves dragged under by a current of self-loathing, or gotten lost in a stream of thoughts. Maybe they have been reassured in their time of distress by a person who cared. By opening her work with a realistic psychological

---

[28] *Cité*, 1.3, p. 626.

portrait of her narrator, de Pizan welcomes her readers to see themselves in her. And even

though the Virtues do most of the talking in the later parts of the work, we still see

Christine's reactions to the things they tell her, as she assures them that she believes them,

remarks on the things their narratives remind her of, and continually asks questions to

guide the discussion.[29] The ordinary woman in the midst of an extraordinary experience,

voicing the questions, revelations and fears that readers might have, is designed to allow

them to feel present in the text.

By making Christine a figure in which her readers may see themselves, de Pizan thus

also makes her a figure they may learn from. If they recognize their own lives and struggles

in Christine's, then they will be able to viscerally perceive how the solutions she discovers

are relevant to them. They will be able to see themselves through the lens of how Christine

sees herself, as well as through the lens of the three Virtues, who offer Christine a different

perspective on her experiences. And by following along with Christine as she learns how to

recognize and exercise her own virtue, see the virtues of the women she knows in the

stories she reads, and appreciate the value of her own experience, readers will be able to

internalize these lessons, secure in the knowledge that they are both true and relevant to

their lives.[30]

---

[29] As Andrea Tarnowski notes, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice "are the ones who do the talking: most of the text is made up of their speeches. But in this work, Christine is far from being a passive listener: she calls on the ladies and questions them, asking them to clarify one point or another. The reader cannot forget Christine; she remains a strong presence throughout." Andrea Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 191.

[30] Much has been said about the value of experience in Christine de Pizan's works, in particular of the status of experience as a metric for truth. See, for example: Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 36–37; Mary Anne C. Case, "Christine de Pizan and the Authority of Experience," in *Christine de Pizan*

Indeed, even though one of the goals of the work is to make women aware of general truths about women's potential, as well as how women manifest general moral principles such as "loyalty" and "chastity," these lessons are, as Andrea Tarnowski notes, couched in terms of particular human examples—whether of Christine or of other virtuous women. As she argues: "The core of Christine's enterprise in the *Cité* . . . is to accede to the universal *by way of* the individual, to use particular stories, her own and others', as channels to a single truth."[31] I would go further and argue that these moral truths, while they may be single and universal, are only knowable through, and can only be manifested by, the individual.[32] As a result, it is vitally important for individual women to see what these virtues look like when embodied by humans like them, and to consider how these universal principles fit into the

---

and the Categories of Difference, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 71–87; Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," 191; Laura Kathryn McRae, "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing in Christine de Pisan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*," *Romanic Review* 82, no. 4 (November 1, 1991): 415, 419, 421–22, 431, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/interpretation-acts-reading-writing-christine-de/docview/1290879238/se-2?accountid=14512.

[31] Tarnowski, "Christine's Selves," 184. Tarnowski's focus, however, is on how the individual and particular in de Pizan's works is always a means to, and is subordinate to, the universal, whereas my emphasis is much more on the particular as the particular. Tarnowski, 184, 186, 188.

[32] For a discussion of the relationship between the particular and the knowable in Christine de Pizan's thought, see: Sarah Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre Du Chemin de Long Estude*," in *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). While the Aristotelian framework Kay uses (in which only particulars exist but only universals can be known) is different from the terms in which I understand my own argument, I concur with her assessment that de Pizan recognizes how the contingencies of individual context and embodied experience shape the kinds of knowledge one can form, as well as the idea that knowledge has to come from engagement with the particular and from individual sensory experiences (even if, in Aristotle's figuration, the relationship between knowledge and experience is somewhat paradoxical). Kay, 152–57, 159–60, 173, 176. See also: Sarah Kay, "The Didactic Space: The City in Christine de Pizan, Augustine, and Irigaray," in *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*, Germanistiche Symposien Berichtsbände 23 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106011256432.

contingencies of their own lives.[33] After all, even though Reason, as she appears to

Christine, is an embodiment of a pure virtue, what she holds in her hands is a mirror that

shows viewers themselves as they are.[34] An encounter with Truth reveals this truth in the

guise of the self. [35]

Hence, what de Pizan shows her readers, through the figure of Christine, is the way a

particular kind of intellectual and moral virtue takes hold in an individual and shapes her

thoughts and actions. Over the course of the work, de Pizan dramatizes Christine's learning

process, giving her readers the opportunity to follow along with her and learn as she

learns. [36] The value of this method of teaching can be seen in the opening of the *Chemin de*

lonc estude. When the Christine-narrator of this work identifies with Boethius, she does not

simply see herself in him—she also follows the trajectory of his personal transformation

---

[33] Elizabeth Allen puts it well: "If particular readers appropriate texts to changing situations, then the value of those texts will depend not only on how well they demonstrate general truths, but also on how well they make those truths available in sensory and affective detail." Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 18.

[34] *Cité*, 1.3 p. 627.

[35] See Cynthia Ho's reading of Reason's mirror: "Christine knows the truth by gazing into the mirror, and the truth she sees is her own reflection." Cynthia Ho, "Communal and Individual Autobiography in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*," *CEA Critic* 57, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44377130. In another reading of Reason's mirror, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet regards it as a multifaceted emblem of one of the writer's tools. Understood as a symbol of introspection, the mirror permits the author to write about her feelings. Understood as a symbol of the example (the didactic "mirror"), it enables didactic writing. After all, as she notes, the stories of women that de Pizan uses to build her city become mirrors for the women within it. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, "Fondements et fondations de l'écriture chez Christine de Pizan. Scènes de lecture et Scènes d'incarnation," in *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 95.

[36] As Carr states: "we watch as 'Christine' is transformed and reoriented toward appropriate understanding, and then appropriate action. It is possible to see ourselves in her, and we are able to have the moment of 'this is how it is' that allows us to take something with us out of the story material for our own self-formation." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 208.

both mentally and emotionally, mapping his experiences onto her own. And by replicating

key elements of Boethius's transformation in her description of Christine's experience of

learning, de Pizan invites her readers to have the same experience.[37]

In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, after hearing the Boethius-narrator's complaints

and asking him some clarifying questions, Lady Philosophy diagnoses him with

forgetfulness, stating that he has forgotten his own identity, as well as the God who governs

the world.[38] In order to cure him, she must help him to understand both the nature of the

world and of himself as a human being. As Philosophy engages the Boethius-narrator in

dialogue on these topics, readers are exposed both to Philosophy's arguments and the

narrator's personal reactions to them, and they are able to follow along with his persuasion

as he is persuaded. Like Boethius, in the opening of the *Cité des dames*, Christine forces

herself to forget or disregard both her own experiences as a woman and the experiences of

the women she knows. Much as Lady Philosophy does for Boethius, the three Virtues must

jog her memory by explaining her errors to her and by showing her images of virtuous

women, in whose virtues she can see reflections of her own.[39] And much as Boethius's

---

[37] Indeed, as discussed previously, both Boethius's *Consolation* and Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames* can be understood as protreptic works that function by encouraging identification with a narrator-protagonist undergoing an experience of ethical transformation. Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*, 9–10.

[38] Boethius, *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh, 2008th, reimpr. ed., Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), bk. 1, prose 6, p. 17.

[39] In *Christine de Pizan and the moral defence of women: Reading beyond gender*, Brown-Grant notes this parallel between Boethius's work and de Pizan's, stating: "The three Virtues have to teach Christine, and by extension her female readers, using *anamnesis* or recollection, a Platonic doctrine which Philosophy employs with her disciple Boethius to help him recall the knowledge he once had but has forgotten . . . Through many other persistent reminders, the *Cité* serves to reactivate the memory of those readers who, like Christine, have internalized misogynist teachings by revealing how they have unjustly forgotten women's contributions to society." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 153.

conversion is shown proceeding step by step to his ultimate consolation, so, too, does the reader watch as Christine asks questions, receives answers, remembers what she has forgotten about women's virtues, contemplates what she hears, and learns the value of her own experience. As Rosalind Brown-Grant puts it: "she reveals to her readers the type of process which they must undergo in reading the *Cité* by first going through this process herself."[40]

A window into what this process looks like can be seen by tracing Christine's trajectory as she goes from doubting women's virtue and denying the validity of her experience to recognizing the virtue of the women around her by drawing connections between her own experience and the images of virtuous women in the stories she hears. In the opening of the work, as mentioned above, Christine persuades herself that everything she knows about women's virtue, based on her experience of being a woman and knowing other women, is incorrect because men of authority say it is.[41] The despair and confusion this misconception causes her are palpable, and readers are invited to feel the abasement that Christine has inflicted upon herself. Upon appearing in Christine's room, however, Reason quickly and consistently takes steps to teach Christine how she can come to remember women's virtue by recognizing the validity of stories in which she can see her own experience reflected and suspecting the veracity of stories which utterly contradict this experience.[42] And in following along with Christine, readers can see what it looks like

---

[40] Brown-Grant, 152.

[41] *Cité*, 1.1 pp. 617-621.

[42] This does not mean that Christine's experience is treated as universal, rather that universal statements about the nature of womankind must always be considered in terms of possible counter-examples drawn from life.

when a woman uses her own reason (and rectitude, and justice) to guide her.

Shortly after appearing, Reason advises Christine to use her experience to evaluate the truth of the texts she reads, assuring her that she has never seen women behave as badly as they do in the works of misogynist authors because these authors are lying.[43] While Christine is not necessarily immediately convinced, she relates that she is partially reassured by these words, and her learning process begins.[44] Later, Reason adds to the lesson, telling Christine that she can recognize the falsehood of certain statements about the female body by considering herself: "Tu puez congnoistre par toy meismes sans nulle autre preuve . . . car se tu l'as lu, ce te puet estre chose magnifeste que il est traittié tout de mençonges." [You can know it by the example of yourself, without any other proof . . . because you can be the clear evidence that shows what you have read is a treatise full of lies.][45] After some additional persuasion on the part of Reason, Christine begins to recognize that "femme est moult noble chose" [woman is a very noble thing].[46] Gradually, she is learning how to use her own self-knowledge to assess the works she reads and draw conclusions from them.

Reason goes beyond simply telling Christine to rely on her own experience, however: she also models this practice for her by reminding Christine of an experience she, herself has had. When trying to persuade Christine that women are capable of moderation,

---

[43] *Cité*, 1.2 p. 625. A number of scholars have commented on the way that, in the *Livre de la cité des dames*, Christine de Pizan treats experience as a form of knowledge and as a metric by which one can determine truth. See, for example: Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," 191; McRae, "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing," 415, 431; Madeleine Jeay, "Traversée par le verbe : l'écriture de soi comme geste prophétique chez Christine de Pizan," *Dalhousie French Studies* 47 (Summer 1999): 23, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40837271.

[44] *Cité*, 1.2 p. 626.

[45] *Cité*, 1.9 p. 649.

[46] *Cité*, 1.9 p. 652.

Reason asks her:

> "ne te souvient il que n'a pas moult, si que tu estoyes a un jour de feste a la porte de ton hotel devisant avecques une honnourable damoyselle / ta voysine, et tu avisas un homme ysant d'une taverne qui aloit devisant a un autre: 'J'ay tant despendu en la taverne, ma femme ne buvera huy mais de vin,' et que adonc tu l'appellas et luy demandas la cause pourquoy elle n'en buveroit. Et il te dist: 'Pour ce, dame, care elle a une telle maniere que toutes les foiz que je viens de la taverne, elle me demande combien j'ay despendu. Et se plus y a de douze deniers, elle vaule recompenser par la sobresce de la bouche ce que j'ay despendu"[47]

> ["don't you remember that on a feast day a little while ago you were talking outside your house with your neighbour, a respectable young lady. You saw a man coming out of a tavern who said to his friend: 'I've just spent sop much in the inn that my wife won't have any wine to drink today.' You called him over and asked him why she wouldn't do so. He replied: 'My lady, it's because every time I come home from the tavern she asks me how much I've spent. If it's more than twelve deniers, she makes up for this cost by refraining from drinking herself."][48]

Once Christine confirms that "de ce moult bien me souvient" [I remember this very well], Reason explains to her how this example, drawn from her own experience, is an example of women's natural sobriety.[49] And while this lesson does not utterly assuage Christine's doubts, readers can see that she has learned from it when she later begins to apply it to her "readings" of the stories Reason tells her.[50]

Thus, after hearing stories of famous female painters from ancient Greece and Rome, Christine draws a connection between these exemplary women's virtues and the virtues of a woman she knows. She tells Reason about a woman named Anastaise, who is

---

[47] *Cité*, 1.10, p. 655.

[48] Brown-Grant, trans., *City*, p. 24.

[49] *Cité*, 1.10, p. 655.

[50] As McRae argues: "Christine herself acts as the model of the perfect reader, writer, and interpreter. Therefore, the book itself provides a gloss on how to read the stories and 'read' the lives of the women contained in the dialogue." McRae, "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing," 431.

excellent at painting the decorations and miniatures of illuminated manuscripts.[51] Christine states that she is aware of Anastaise's virtues "par experience," since Anastaise has done work for her before. To this Reason replies: "De ce te crois je bien, chiere fille; assez de femmes soubtilles trouveroit on par le monde, qui cerchier les vouldroit." [I believe you well, dear daughter; one can find many skillful women in the world, if one wishes to look for them.][52] From Reason, Christine learns to look to her own experience when contemplating what she reads. And when she recognizes a parallel between her experience and that of the women she has read about, Reason rewards her with praise and states that anyone can do what she has done. Over the course of the work, then, Christine moves from disregarding the value of her experience, to being instructed in its value, to watching as Reason models drawing connections between text and experience, to doing so herself, to learning that the skills she has learned have value for others. By humanizing Christine, de Pizan encourages readers to identify with her. And by demonstrating Christine's own process of learning, she gives readers an opportunity to learn along with her.[53]

Christine is not the only figure in whom readers are invited to see themselves, however. The multitude of women whose stories de Pizan retells are likewise offered to her readers as figures in whom they might see reflections of their own lives. If readers are able to perceive a resemblance between themselves and these images of virtue, then they can ideally learn to recognize these women's virtues in themselves. Unlike the contemporary

---

[51] *Cité*, 1.41, p. 759-60.

[52] *Cité*, 1.41, p. 760.

[53] I will discuss this concept of vicarious experience more fully in the following section. For further analysis of the ways Christine de Pizan authorizes her readers to use their own experience in evaluating and interpreting the texts they read, see: McRae, "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing."

Christine, of course, many of these exemplary women lived very different lives from de Pizan's readers. They are also, in many ways, idealized—presented as the epitomes of various virtues. Because of these factors, it might be hard to imagine how de Pizan could expect her readers to identify with them.[54] In the final section of her narrative, however, de Pizan makes it explicit that she wants her readers to see themselves reflected in these women. When offering her concluding thoughts on the completion of the City of Ladies, Christine tells her female readers: "vous pouvez veoir que la matiere dont elle est faitte est toute de vertu, voire, si reluysant que toutes vous y povez mirer et par especial es combles de ceste derreniere partie, et semblablement en ce qui vous puet touchier des autres."[55] [you can see that the material of which it is made is entirely virtuous: see, so brilliantly shining that all of you can see your reflections in it, and especially in the tops of the towers of this last part, and likewise in that which can pertain to you in the others]. Because the city is made of the stories of virtuous women, if her readers are able to see their reflections in the walls, then this must mean that they are seeing themselves in the *women* de Pizan describes to them. Indeed, her use of the word "reluysant" denotes something that shines by reflecting light: the stories of these women are not only radiant, but they also reflect the radiance of those who look into them. By beginning where they are, seeing themselves in the portions of the work that in some ways "touch" or pertain to their own lives, de Pizan's readers will be able to use this recognition to acknowledge their own virtue.

In order to enable her readers to undergo this self-reflective experience, however,

---

[54] See Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, "*Le Livre des Trois Vertus* et le *sermo ad status*," in *Une femme de lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. Liliane Dulac and Bernard Ribémont, Medievalia "Etudes christiniennes" 16 (Orléans: Paradigme, 1995), 141.

[55] *Cité*, 3.19, p. 1032.

de Pizan has to take steps to ensure that these feminine models effectively reflect recognizable aspects of her readers' experiences. Indeed, the idea that readers might be able to see themselves more clearly in certain parts of the work as opposed to others suggests that the diverse experiences of readers will in some way influence which parts of the work they can identify with and which they cannot. As de Pizan says, they will "especially" ["par especial"] be able to see themselves in the third part of the work, as well as the sections of other parts of the work that are relevant to them.[56] Relevance determines what portions of the work the readers will best be able to identify with: the work thus succeeds or fails based on how personally relevant its images are to its readers. In accordance with this, rather than commanding her readers to see themselves in her work, de Pizan presents herself as *enabling* them to see themselves in it. In the above sentence, she uses some form of the verb "pouvoir" [to be able to] three times. She states that her readers *can* see how shining the city is, that because it is so reflective they *can* see their reflections in it, and that they will especially be able to do so in the parts that *can* pertain to them. What is stressed, then, is the fact that the work is giving readers opportunities for reflection. It is an edifice that provides access points, enabling readers to do with it what they cannot do with so many works: learn from its examples by recognizing aspects of their own lives within them.

In order to facilitate this recognition, de Pizan adopts three strategies: 1) presenting a variety of women who exercise virtue in a variety of areas of experience, 2) humanizing some of her exempla by describing their thoughts and feelings, and 3) including contemporary women among her examples in order to help her readers recognize

---

[56] *Cité*, 3.19, p. 1032.

themselves as akin to her historical and legendary figures of virtue. While de Pizan focuses

exclusively on women who excel in one or more areas, she depicts a range of women and a

range of areas. She includes stories of women warriors, rulers, scholars, writers, artists,

martyrs, inventors, prophetesses, and loyal wives and daughters, and she gives multiple

examples of women who excel in each field. The virtues these women exhibit are likewise

varied: some are loyal, some are chaste, some are courageous, or intelligent, or skilled in a

craft, or pious, or prudent, or athletic. And these women occupy different stages in their

lives: there are children, adults, married women, mothers, widows, young women and old.

The effect of these varied figures is to provide a wide range of potential access points for

women, depending on their different aptitudes and positions in life.[57]

It is unlikely, it is true, that de Pizan's audience contained any Amazon warriors,

queens regnant, or Christian converts facing martyrdom. As Marie-Thérèse Lorcin wryly

notes, examples such as Thamyris, Ceres, and Saint Catherine might serve as effective

counter-examples to male derision, but they are "sans doute peu inspirants face aux

difficultés quotidiennes, aux mille problèmes de conscience que fait surgir la vie en societé"

[doubtless uninspiring in the face of quotidian difficulties, the thousand problems of

---

[57] See Andrea Echtermann's argument that, by presenting the many ways that various virtues have been manifested by women throughout history, Christine de Pizan presents women with both knowledge of their history and a range of identities in which they might find their own. Andrea Echtermann, "Women's Dialogue in the *Epistre au dieu d'amours* and *Le Livre de la Cité des dames*," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 496, 501, 503. As she states: "The organizing principle of the *Cité des dames* is the history of women's virtue, and the evidence of the tradition of women thinkers, inventors, prophets, rulers and martyrs speaks for itself. Not only does this catalogue of excellent women present a wide spectrum of women's historical experiences, it also presents a differentiated and open system of identities possible for women." Echtermann, 503.

conscience that life in society gives rise to].[58] The Christine of the *Chemin*, however, was not a literal prisoner when she saw herself reflected in Boethius and his struggles. Absolute identity of context and circumstances is not necessary for identification—merely the perception of similarities that are familiar enough to "touch" upon one's own. What de Pizan makes accessible to her readers through these women are not necessarily their occupations or their literal deeds but rather the nature of their virtues, their struggles, their thoughts, their feelings, and their triumphs.[59] Thus, she describes not only the external characteristics of many of the women she presents, but also their inner lives. When discussing the deeds of Queen Orithiya of the Amazons, for example, she explains how Orithiya's love for her kinswomen led her to be fearful when they were captured, and how this motivated her to call a truce between her forces and the Greeks.[60] She vividly describes Penthisilea's sorrow at the death of Hector and how this motivates her to fight heroically.[61] In relating the story of how Antonia counseled her husband, Belisarius, de Pizan speaks of Antonia's deep pity for her husband, but also how she hid her feelings in

[58] Lorcin, "*sermo ad status*," 141. Lorcin considers the tendency to give historical or legendary exempla who have little in common with contemporary women to be a common failing of the works of lay moralists. Lorcin, 140. She looks much more favorably on de Pizan's *Livre des trois vertus*, which, as I will discuss later, organizes its examples in terms of class and focuses on representing the realities of contemporary women's daily lives. Lorcin, 141. It is true that, although her work is exceptional in many ways, de Pizan is not innovative in her choice to use exemplary women of the past to provide models for women of her own time. Yet I would argue that even if the figures of the *Cité* are not particularly mundane, de Pizan does seek to encourage her readers to perceive aspects of themselves in them: if not the concrete details of their lives then in the struggles they face. And in the *Trois vertus*, she certainly provides them with plenty of quotidian models to learn from.

[59] See Rosalind Brown-Grant's suggestion that what de Pizan's female readers are meant to emulate are the "*qualities* shown by the exceptional women of Books I and III of the *Cité*, even if they cannot literally imitate their *deeds*." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 167.

[60] *Cité*, 1.18, pp. 692-93.

[61] *Cité*, 1.19, pp. 694-701.

order to console him before presenting him with her plan for victory.[62] These glimpses into the minds of her characters offer her readers chances to see their own thoughts, feelings, and actions reflected in theirs.

De Pizan also takes steps to help her readers to recognize connections between their own lives and the lives of these women by including more mundane and familiar examples and explanations amongst her more outlandish depictions. Thus, when describing Minerva's triumph over Vulcan, god of fire, she states explicitly that these supernatural occurrences can be understood in mundane terms: "qui estoit a dire qu'elle surmonta l'ardeur et concupisscence de la char, qui donne grant assault en jeunesce" [That is to say that she [Minerva] overcame the burning heat and desire of the flesh, which greatly assails one in youth].[63] Her readers may never have striven against the gods, but they may very well have striven against their own immoderate desires. Including this gloss thus makes it easier for them to see their own experience in Minerva's. Similarly, when Reason intends to prove to Christine that women have good judgment, she first gives the realistically grounded example of the behaviors and practical duties of a good wife as discussed in Proverbs 31:10-31 and then gives the examples of Gaia Cirilla and queen Dido, both of whom exemplify this virtue: Gaia in the management of her household and Dido in the

---

[62] *Cité*, 2.29, p. 853.

[63] *Cité*, 1.34. p. 741. This is consistent with de Pizan's general practice of euhemerism in this work, whereby she presents goddesses such as Minerva and Ceres as historical women. As Eleni Stecopoulos and Karl Uitti argue, "By expelling the mythic—the fabulous—from these heroines, Christine, very much the Christian and vernacular writer of the early fifteenth century, aligns them with her own, and her readers', reality. She effects a genuine *translatio*. By denying their deity, she reconstructs them as viable—meaningful and true—models for her age." Eleni Stecopoulos and Karl D. Uitti, "Christine de Pizan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*: The Reconstruction of Myth," in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 50–51.

clever way she thwarts her brother's wickedness and founds a kingdom.[64] By beginning

with a mundane example and building to examples that may be less familiar in their

external details, de Pizan is able to highlight the continuity of virtue present across these

narratives: in the image of a good wife managing her home, in the image of a queen doing

the same, and in the image of queen Dido ruling her kingdom. A prudent women may see

her own prudence reflected in any of these depictions.[65]

Finally, de Pizan assists women to recognize the connections between their own

lives and those of these women, both by having Christine model this behavior (as

mentioned above), and by including contemporary women among her examples.[66] Indeed,

while the majority of the women whose biographies she presents are from legends and

histories of Classical Greece and Rome, de Pizan also includes women from her own era, or

from recent history, including women of her personal acquaintance. After mentioning

certain historical queens and empresses, for example, Reason begins listing and briefly

summarizing the accomplishments of contemporary queens and princesses, in particular

those who ruled after the deaths of their husbands. She concludes by assuring Christine

---

[64] *Cité*, 1.44-45.

[65] I draw this reading and these examples from Rosalind Brown-Grant, who argues that de Pizan uses this proverb as a way of "translating these qualities into her readers' own realm of experience" by drawing "a parallel between the actions of women warriors and intellectuals and those of wives and mothers by referring to their shared quality of prudence . . . Even if Christine's readers could not aspire to being warriors or teachers, they could still cultivate the quality of prudence, the exercise of which she specifically associates with women in their married lives." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 167.

[66] De Pizan's choice to include women from her own era is another way in which she diverges from Boccaccio. According to Rosalind Brown-Grant: "Christine sees history in terms of progress, so that her catalogue of women *does* include examples from her own time. Moreover, this progressivist theory of history allows her to emphasize the continuity between women of the past and those of the present in terms of their virtue, as opposed to Boccaccio's view, expressed in the *De Casibus*, of human history as merely a continuum of vice." Brown-Grant, 162.

that she could tell her about many other widowed women who ruled just as well as their

husbands and were equally well-loved by their subjects.[67] Later, Christine asks Rectitude if

modern French women will be able to live in her city, as well as ancient and foreign

women. As Reason did, Rectitude lists various royal and noble French women who are

notable for their virtue. And while she pays the most attention to women of the upper

classes (where one might find de Pizan's patrons and dedicatees), Rectitude ends with a

declaration that "D'autres contesses, baronnesses, dames, damoyselles, bourgeoises et de

tous estaz y a tant de bonnes et de belles, malgré les medisans, que Dieux en soit louez qui

les y maintiengne. Et celles qui sont desfaillans, veuille amander"[68] [In spite of the

slanderers, there are many other countesses, baronesses, ladies, maidens, bourgeois, and

women of all estates who are virtuous and excellent; God be praised for keeping them so,

and may He desire to amend those who are flawed]. By placing these familiar examples

besides the virtuous women of legend, de Pizan suggests that to see one's virtues reflected

in these women places one in the same category as the exemplary women of the past,

despite differences in class or temporal or physical distance. By providing varied images of

virtuous women in whom her readers can see themselves, de Pizan thus invites all of her

readers to recognize the virtues they have within themselves.

Le Livre des trois vertus

In the *Livre de la cité des dames*, Christine de Pizan seeks to teach all virtuous women to

recognize their own goodness, so that they may take their place in her eternal city. In the

---

[67] *Cité*, 1.13, p. 672.

[68] *Cité*, 2.68, p. 970.

sequel to this work, the *Livre des trois vertus*, de Pizan turns her attention to the women who the *Cité* leaves out: those who are insufficiently virtuous to enter the City of Ladies, and who thus desperately need the lessons in moral virtue and social conduct that will grant them access to this sanctuary. It is these lessons, this access, that the *Trois vertus* promises to deliver.

Organized by social class, the work begins with advice on virtuous conduct for princesses and noblewomen, working its way down the social ladder to advise governesses and teachers of the wealthy and powerful, bourgeois women and the wives of merchants, servants, laborers, prostitutes, poor women, and old and young women of every class.[69] The book itself was originally dedicated to a young princess, Marguerite de Bourgogne, and the first section of the work, which concerns the conduct of princesses, is the longest, occupying more than half of the text.[70] De Pizan did have patrons that she needed to please, and the upper classes were the ones most likely to have the education and means to purchase and make use of copies of her book, as well as the ability to ensure its distribution.[71] But to a far greater degree than the *Cité des dames*, the *Livre des trois vertus*

---

[69] In this regard, as Lorcin notes, de Pizan's work was profoundly innovative, as didactic works for women at the time often tended to cast them as a single, monolithic class, to focus on a single class to the exclusion of others, or to divide all classes of women based on marital status (virgin, wife, widow). Lorcin, "*sermo ad status*," 139. As Lorcin argues, de Pizan's criteria for inventorying the female population allow her "dresser de la population féminine un tableau infiniment plus réaliste et plus complet que tout ce qui avait été fait jusqu'alors" [to draw a picture of the feminine population that was infinitely more realistic and complete than anything that had been made before then]. Lorcin, 144.

[70] Charity Cannon Willard, "Introduction to *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*," in *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1989), xii.

[71] Charity Cannon Willard, "Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*: Feminine Ideal or Practical Advice?," in *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Diane Bornstein (Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981), 102–3. Indeed, noblewomen were both a target of the advice in the book and a means for its distribution; as de Pizan comments

is directed towards a mixed-class audience.[72] And in order to reach out to this audience, more variable in both virtue and life circumstances, Christine de Pizan provides examples that are grounded in the mundane realities of women's daily lives.[73]

The figures of women that de Pizan uses to teach her readers are not, as in the *Cité*, named individuals, either contemporary or historical. By and large, the women with whom Christine populates the *Trois Vertus* are abstractions: figures with names like "la bonne princepce," [the good princess], "la joenne haute dame" [the young noble lady], and "Ceste sage mainagiere" [this wise housewife], or collectives like "toute femme d'aage" [every older woman] or "dames de religion," ["ladies in religious orders"].[74] Each figure represents

---

at the end of her work, she plans on sending copies of the work to various princesses and noblewomen so that it might be disseminated more widely. *Trois vertus* 3.14, p. 225. She also expresses, in various parts of her work, the possibility that even if women of the lower classes cannot directly access her book, noble women might indirectly distribute its message if they improve by reading it and thus come to function "comme mirouer et exemple de toutes bonnes meurs" ["as a mirror and example of all good conduct"] for women of other classes. *Trois vertus*, 1.1, p. 9. See also *Trois vertus* 1.27, p. 111, and 1.10, pp. 38-9. As Rosalind Brown-Grant argues: "as a 'mirror for women', the *Trois Vertus* aims to inspire its readers to imitate virtuous forms of behaviour which they should then disseminate by their own deeds." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 179–80. On de Pizan's idea of exemplarity filtering down through the social hierarchy, see: Jean-Claude Mühlethaler, "'Traictier de vertu au profit d'ordre de vivre': relire l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan à la lumière des miroirs des princes," in *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, ed. Angus J. Kennedy et al., vol. 2 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), 592, 594, 596.

[72] See Lorcin, "*sermo ad status*," 141. For a fuller argument in favor of de Pizan's ambitions to reach a wider audience, see the introduction of this dissertation.

[73] As Marie-Thérèse Lorcin observes, Christine de Pizan displays, in this work, "le souci constant de serrer de près le réel, et d'être utile." [a constant concern with keeping close to the real, and being useful] in her depictions of and advice towards women. Lorcin, 143.

[74] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14; 1.26, p. 104; 3.1, p. 175; 3.6, p. 197; 2.13, 165; Sarah Lawson, trans., *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*, Revised Edition, By Christine de Pizan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 121. As Marion Guarinos notes, de Pizan tends in this work to transition from referring to an entire group of women to referring to a single member of that group, such as moving from addressing "princesses" to discussing "the princess." In doing so, she emphasizes women's individuality. Marion Guarinos, "Individualisme et solidarité dans *Le livre des*

a generalized member of a particular class, a particular kind of woman, or a woman at a

particular stage of her life. And it is largely by describing and evaluating these women: how

they will, do, or must think, feel, and act in certain circumstances, that de Pizan seeks to

teach her readers. It might be difficult, of course, to imagine how a reader could identify

with an abstraction like "the good princess." But although they lack names, these women

are specific: they perform (or are advised to perform) activities that are determined by the

contingencies of their particular social class; they encounter, and are given advice for

dealing with, a wide range of scenarios specific to the spaces they occupy; and they struggle

with problems that are particular to the complications, temptations, and contingencies of

their social roles.[75] Over the course of the work, de Pizan describes in exhaustive detail the

daily lives and obligations of women of a wide variety of classes.[76] And amongst these

---

Trois Vertus de Christine de Pizan," in *Sur le chemin de longue étude… actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, ed. Bernard. Ribémont, Études Christiniennes 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 89, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046884956.

[75] On the specificity and realism of the scenarios, duties, and communities Christine de Pizan depicts in this work, see: Barry Collett, "The Three Mirrors of Christine de Pizan," in *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, Disputatio 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 11, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325; Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, "Christine de Pizan analyste de la société," in *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 197–205; Diane Bornstein, "The Ideal of the Lady of the Manor as Reflected in Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*," in *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Diane Bornstein (Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981), 117–28; Diane Bornstein, "Self-Consciousness and Self Concepts in the Works of Christine de Pizan," in *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Diane Bornstein (Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981), 21–22.

[76] See Josette Wisman's comment: "Christine de Pizan ne se fait pas faute de donner des exemples de comment la journée de femmes de tout rang devrait se passer, et quel travail chacune se doit d'accomplir." [Christine de Pizan does not fail to give examples of how women of every rank should spend their day, and what work each must accomplish]. Josette A Wisman, "Aspects socio-économiques du *Livre des trois vertus* de Christine de Pizan," *Le moyen français* 30 (1992): 35, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.LMFR.3.140.

descriptions, she weaves snippets of women's voices: of the objections and questions of potential readers, of the thoughts and feelings that particular women might have, and even the voices of the people that women might overhear or speak to.[77] These specific details offer access points for readers: if they recognize the relevance of these figures' behaviors and circumstances to their own lives, then they will be better able to learn from them. The sheer variety of examples she provides thus functions as a way to enable a diverse group of women to see themselves in her work.[78]

Indeed, when describing her intentions for her work, Christine de Pizan repeatedly states that although her lessons are meant for every woman, different women will inevitably see different parts of her work as relevant to them. This sentiment can be seen in the introduction to Part Two of the work, when de Pizan is transitioning from giving advice to princesses to giving advice to women of the court, noblewomen, and women in religious orders. Here, the Three Virtues state that they are not going to repeat everything they have said in Part One, because even though the following sections will cover many of the same

---

[77] In rendering women's voices in this way, Christine de Pizan, as Andrea Echtermann and Sylvia Nagel argue, "follows a mimetic approach to women's speech: by representing a wide range of situations in which women speak historically, she seeks to recapture the many voices of women that had hitherto been silenced." Andrea Echtermann and Sylvia Nagel, "Recuperating the Polyphony of Women's Speech: Dialogue and Discourse in the Works of Christine de Pizan," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe. Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 495.

[78] As Sylvia Nagel argues, the variety of women whom Christine de Pizan presents to her readers as models represents how "She understands the *savoir de femme* not as an a priori concept (as misogynists do, equating ontology and epistemology) but as the product of women's different experiences and social situations. For Christine, what women know stems not from their 'being women *tout court*, but from their being women in different situations, and this perspective explains why the *Trois Vertus* is so resolutely pedagogical and situation-oriented, with its purpose clearly stated as *l'enseignement des femmes*." As a result of this understanding of women's situational knowledge, "the advice Christine gives is tailored to specific situations in which members of specific estates may find themselves." Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," 511, 513.

topics, the virtues that are useful to princesses may be useful to all. Despite the general

applicability of the work's lessons however, they go on to suggest that readers may take

they need from amongst the book's particulars:

> "Si serve ce que dit est pour toutes ou il eschiet, et en prengne ce de quoy sentira qu'elle ait besoing au bien et prouffit de son ame et de ses meurs; car semblablement que aux plus grans maistresses et mestier aux dames et autres que elles aient tousjours et en tous leurs fais devant leurs yeux et en leur memoire l'amour et craintte de Nostre Seigneur . . ."[79]

> [That which is said is useful for all who happen upon it, and one may take from it whatever she feels she needs for the good and profit of her soul and conduct; it is as necessary for the greatest mistresses as it is for ladies and others that they always, and in all of their actions, have the love and fear of Our Lord before their eyes and in their memories.]

She reiterates these concepts at the opening of Part Three, when the Three Virtues once

again express the desire that the work will be valuable to all, while suggesting that the

work's value inheres in each reader finding, among its general lessons, those that are most

relevant to or suitable for her:[80]

> . . . c'est nostre entente que tout ce que recordé avons aux aultres dames, tant es vertus comme ou gouvernement de vivre, en ce qui puet a chascune femme apertenir, de quelque estat que elle soit, soit aussi bien dit pour les unes que pour les aultres, si en puet chascune prendre telle piece qu'elle voit qui lui apertient.[81]

> [It is our intention that everything that we have recorded about other ladies, with regard to virtues as well as the government of one's life, can pertain to each woman, of whatever estate that she is. It is just as well said for one as for another, in that each can take that piece which she sees as pertaining to her.]

In her examples of noble women, then, de Pizan teaches general lessons in virtue that

---

[79] *Trois vertus*, 2.1, p. 122.

[80] Christine de Pizan's choice of word, "appartenir," can denote that which is appropriate, suitable, useful, relevant, or necessary. I have chosen to translate it as "to pertain," acknowledging the fact that this word does not encompass the original's full range of connotations.

[81] *Trois vertus*, 3.1, pp. 171-72.

would benefit any reader. But she understands that readers are, by and large, only going to

take from the work what they see as pertaining to them, if they take anything at all.[82] Hence

it becomes necessary to provide readers with a diverse range of examples, in the hopes of

helping them see the relevance of at least some portion of the work to their lives.

The goal of providing these examples is, of course, to teach women lessons in

conduct, which on the surface might seem to be more restrictive than the lessons of

identification.[83] Indeed, the tone of the work is, in general, much more didactic than that of

---

[82] De Pizan also acknowledges that some readers might reject the work wholesale, in the way that listeners to a sermon may use the descriptions of the vices of other classes as fuel to mock them and ignore the parts of the sermon that hit too close to home. Hence, she says that a good preacher ought to consider his audience and describe every group within it so that none may scorn the others. And she asks her readers to please listen to the teachings that pertain to them, which are also located in portions of the text that do not address their class in particular. *Trois vertus*, 3.1 p. 171-2. She also uses various strategies (including identification) to "catch" the attention of recalcitrant readers, as she indicates in the introductory metaphor by which she compares her task of writing to that of a birdcatcher spreading nets and traps. Once she has "caught" the women in her audience, her goal is to install them in the "cage" of her city. *Trois vertus*, 1.1, p. 8-9. For further analysis of this metaphor, see: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 179; Carolyn P. Collette, "Christine de Pizan: Mapping the Routes to Agency," in *Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385-1620* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 38, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106018813409; Liliane Dulac, "The Representation and Functions of Feminine Speech in Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*," in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards, trans. Christine Reno (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 13.

[83] As others have noted, the lessons Christine de Pizan tries to teach her readers in the *Trois Vertus* are also, in general, socially and politically conservative ones. See particularly: Roberta L. Krueger, "A woman's response: Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre du Duc des Vrais Amans* and the limits of romance," in *Women readers and the ideology of gender in Old French verse romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 223, 232–37. See also Sheila Delaney's (somewhat infamous) critique of Christine de Pizan's social conservatism: Sheila Delany, "'Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 177–97. It is true that the *Trois Vertus* largely tends towards the maintenance of traditional class boundaries and gender roles. I do not, however, see this as a factor that is fundamentally at odds with de Pizan's goal of enabling women to see themselves in, and to learn from her work—even if some of the things they are meant to learn involve complicity with (and survival within) a particular social order. As Roberta Krueger puts it: "Although her works for women appear to reinforce the twinned hierarchies of class and gender and to maintain 'chascune dans son estat,' they also invite all women to embrace an ethic of moral and social self-

the *Cité des dames*, especially when de Pizan is telling her readers what women of different classes *must* do if they are to be good. And the further she moves down the social ladder, the more often she frames her advice in terms of necessity and obligation, shifting from using the future tense to describe how a good woman *will* behave to using a form of the word "devoir" to state how a good woman *must* behave.[84] This sense of obligation reflects the high stakes of her project, the rigidity of the moral and social structures she wishes to teach women to navigate, and a certain degree of necessary propriety: one must, after all, be careful not to be too demanding when addressing a princess. It also, at least on the surface, might seem to constitute a demand for obedience from readers, an expectation that they shape themselves to strict models, regardless of their individual needs. If every good housewife must act a certain way, if every noble lady must comport herself in such-and-such a fashion, then this would seem to contrast the personalized nature of the lessons of identification.

In many ways, however, the sheer diversity of the work works against the idea of a single interpretation to be forced onto readers. As Roberta Krueger argues, "The profusion of voices and perspectives in this complex work invites not a single response to a

---

improvement." Roberta Krueger, "Christine's Anxious Lessons: Gender, Morality, and the Social Order from the *Enseignemens* to the *Avision*," in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 37.

[84] Lorcin notes this phenomenon as well, commenting that de Pizan's use of the future tense is "le plus respectueux," [the most respectful] hence why she uses it most with the princess, whereas her tone towards the lower classes is "le ton du sermon, un ton péremptoire" [the tone of a sermon, a peremptory tone]. Lorcin, "*sermo ad status*," 146. She notes also that de Pizan tends to use direct address more often towards the end of the work, in particular when addressing "celles pour qui elle éprouve le plus de compassion, comme les veuves et les pauvres, celles qui ont le plus besoin de conseils simples et applicables, inspirés par le bon sens, comme les prostituées ou les jeunes et vielles femmes." [those for whom she experiences the most compassion, like widows or the poor, those who have the most need of simple and applicable counsels, inspired by good sense, like prostitutes or young and old women]. Lorcin, 147. See also: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 188.

monolithic doctrine but, rather, a range of reactions to a multiplicity of contexts and

perspectives."[85] From these varied sources, readers may gather what they need for their

own self-improvement. And beneath the work's lessons in conduct is a larger lesson, one

that is designed to empower women not merely to be taught, but to teach themselves. It is a

lesson in the virtue of *prudence*.[86]

Derived from the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which

allows one to learn from one's own past experiences and use them to plan and perform

morally appropriate responses to the scenarios of the present, prudence is one of the chief

virtues in de Pizan's thought: linked to, and at times indistinguishable from, wisdom

itself.[87] Like *phronesis*, which allows one to learn from the past, prudence is a practical

---

[85] Roberta Krueger, "'Chascune selon son estat': Women's Education and Social Class in the Conduct Books of Christine de Pizan and Anne de France," in "L'Education des filles sous L'Ancien Régime: De Christine de Pizan à Fénelon," special issue, *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature* 24, no. 46 (1997): 30, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015069021320.

[86] See: Karen Green, "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," in *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400-1800*, The New Synthese Historical Library 63 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 24. For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's portrayal of prudence in this work, in particular its social elements, as a means for women to exercise agency, see: Collette, "Mapping the Routes to Agency," 33–39. For an analysis of the *Trois vertus* as focused on the practical application of prudence, see: Zimmermann, "Une lecture politique," 122.

[87] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 73 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 6.1, 6.5, 6.12, 6.13, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL073/1926/volume.xml; Karen Green, "Introduction," in *The Book of Peace*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. and trans. Karen Green et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 24, https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14; Karen Green, "On Translating Christine de Pizan as Philosopher," in *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, Disputatio 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 123–24, 130–31, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325; Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 164–66. See Karen Green's succinct definition: "*Phronesis* is knowledge in an applied and practical sense, and to gain it requires experience." Green, "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," 25. For an excellent study of Christine de Pizan's sources on *phronesis*/prudence and her developing views on this virtue throughout her writing career, see: Green, "On Translating Christine de Pizan as Philosopher." Christine de Pizan's views on prudence, and the concept of

virtue, both cultivated through, and responsive to, experience.[88] Indeed, in the *Cité des Dames*, when Christine asks Reason if women can follow the teachings of prudence, she specifically asks if women's intelligence is:

> . . . prompt et habille es choses qui prudence enseigne. C'est assavoir que elles ayent avis sur ce qui est le meilleur a faire et ad ce qui doit estre laissié, souvenance des choses passes, par quoy soyent plus expertes par l'exemple que ont veu, sages ou gouvernement des choses presentes, qu'elles ayent pourveance sus celles a advenir. Ces choses, comme il me semble, enseigne Prudence."[89]

> [quick and skillful in those matters that prudence teaches. That is to say, do women have the ability to consider what is best to do and what should be avoided, as well as memory of past things, with which they can become more learned by virtue of the examples that they have seen, and are they wise in the management of present things, and do they have foresight regarding those to come? These are the things, it seems to me, that Prudence teaches.][90]

---

phronesis from which it derived, changed over time, as she read different philosophical sources and developed her ideas. Green, 120, 129–31. In defining the term in this study, I draw from Christine de Pizan's discussion of it in the *Cité des dames*, as well as her more mature (and overtly Aristotelian) discussion of the term in her later *Livre de paix*, for although this work was written several years after the *Trois vertus*, some aspects of de Pizan's discussion of prudence in that work can be seen in an earlier form in the *Trois vertus*. As Allyson Carr argues in *Story and Philosophy for Social Change*, the exercise of *phronesis*/prudence in response to one's reading is one of the chief lessons Christine de Pizan wishes to teach her readers. Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 211. According to Carr, this involves readers actively reading and participating in the reading experience; translating what they read to their own lives; interpreting, reinterpreting, and remembering the material they read; and using this to guide their future behavior. Carr, 211. Carr's outline of Christine de Pizan's approach to *phronesis* has been very helpful to me in crafting my own perspective on Christine de Pizan's goals for her readers and some of her methods of pursuing them.

[88] Green, "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," 24; Green, "On Translating Christine de Pizan as Philosopher," 130–31. As Nagel puts it, worldly prudence, in the *Trois vertus*, is a representation of "practical *sagesse*, that is, the practical application of reason and wisdom, or perhaps better, worldly wisdom." It can be understood as "acquired, learned wisdom" in other words, "the practical wisdom of experience." Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," 511–12.

[89] *Cité* 1.43.762

[90] My translation here is influenced by Earl Jeffrey Richards' translation of this passage, as quoted by Karen Green. Earl Jeffrey Richards, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, By Christine de Pizan (London: Picador, 1983), pt. 1, chap. 43, p. 87, quoted in Green, "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," 25–26. In asserting women's capacity for prudence, de Pizan breaks with Aristotle, who was vague about women's ability to exercise this virtue, as well as with his 14th-century translator and glossator Nicholas Oresme, who suggested that women's possession

In exercising prudence, individuals learn from their memories of the examples they have

seen, using their knowledge and deliberative ability to take present actions and plan for the

future. Notably, literary examples are not distinguished from the examples derived from

personal experience: one may learn from books as well as from other parts of one's life.

Indeed, by seeing themselves in textual models and vicariously participating in these

figures' experiences, readers can learn from these experiences just the as they can learn

from their own.

I base this idea of vicarious experience in part on the work of Mary Carruthers, who

argues in *The Book of Memory*:

> . . . the medieval understanding of the complete process of reading does not observe
> in the same way the basic distinction we make between 'what I read in a book' and
> 'my experience' . . . for 'what I read in a book' *is* my experience,' and I make it mine
> by incorporating it (and we should understand the word 'incorporate quite
> literally') in my memory.[91]

By meditating on and memorizing portions of a text, both the literal sense of the text and

one's physiological, emotional, "gut-level" response to it, one makes it one's own,

incorporating it into both mind and body.[92] Because of this incorporation, memories of the

text, when they are recalled and re-experienced, become one's own experiences, and thus

material for learning, for the formation of character, and for ethical decision-making.[93] This

---

of prudence was a rarity, and that women were in general less able to deliberate than men. Green, 27–29.

[91] Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 169.

[92] Carruthers, 169.

[93] Carruthers, 169, 179–80. In explaining the ethical use of one's remembered reading, Carruthers notes that memory was understood as stamping or forming one's habits and character, and thus the

applies to both the experience of reading and the experiences of characters described in a narrative.[94] Indeed, as Sarah Kay argues, one of the assumptions of exemplary narratives is that the experiences a narrative relates, by calling to mind the reader's own experiences or prompting them to imagine themselves having these experiences, can lead to learning just as real experiences do, as readers are equally able to derive general truths from them.[95] And seeing oneself in a character, following along with them vicariously, can, as Allyson Carr argues, help one to gain this form of experiential knowledge.[96]

Indeed, because identification draws the reader closer into alignment with a character and her experiences, it functions as an aid to this kind of ethical learning. By overlaying one's own remembered experiences with the necessarily different experiences of a character, identification allows one to observe and vicariously participate in these

---

remembered portions of one's reading function as matter for the creation of character and the formation of habits of being. Carruthers, 180. By drawing on these remembered pieces, one may express this character in various rhetorical situations. As she states: "In considering what is the ethical nature of reading, one could do much worse than to start with Gregory the Great's comment, that what we see in a text is not rules for what we *ought* to be, but what we *are*, 'our own beauty, our own ugliness.' It is this which enables us to make these texts our own. We read rhetorically, memory makes our reading into our own ethical equipment ('stamps our character'), and we express that character in situations that are also rhetorical in nature, in the expressive gestures and performances which we construct from our remembered experience." Carruthers, 182. One makes the texts one's own by incorporating them into one's memory, and then by recognizing in these remembered texts elements of both what one's character is (as shaped by textual and other remembered experiences) and how one can express it. This process is a kind of retrospective application of self-recognition to remembered texts for the purposes of self-representation. It is both different from, and related to, identification as I understand it.

[94] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 179.

[95] Kay, "The Didactic Space: The City in Christine de Pizan, Augustine, and Irigaray," 440–42.

[96] See Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 207–8. Here, Carr argues that engaging participatively with a work of literature is an important aid to *phronetic* action. Indeed, "We may not in fact understand what is the appropriate action in our contingent world without having first imagined a possible world in which to find ourselves and see—rather, truly experience—what action is appropriate: how we really should *be* in-the-world." Carr, 210.

composite experiences and to gain memories of them, memories which function as material

for *phronesis*.[97]

It is this kind of reading experience, this kind of knowledge, upon which practical

moral action may be based. And it is this kind of reading-knowledge that de Pizan offers to

her readers in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*. By presenting her readers with a set of textual

experiences that may resemble their own, embodied by women who dwell in contexts

similar to theirs, framed as the behaviors that Prudence and the other virtues advise the

individual to perform, readers are invited to recognize the ways that they have already

exercised, or could exercise, prudence in their own lives. And by attending to the specific

details of class and gender that inform her readers' experiences, Christine de Pizan can

craft models for them that facilitate identification, and thus the experience of what

prudence might feel like in their particular contexts. She can also, as she does in the *Cité des*

dames, work to facilitate identification across the boundaries of class by rendering, in

realistic psychological detail, the internal journey of a single character from vice to virtue

as she learns to exercise her prudence. In doing so, de Pizan invites readers to learn with

---

[97] As Elizabeth Allen argues, drawing from Gregory the Great's defense of exempla, exemplary texts, by encouraging conflicting emotional responses in audiences in response to narratives involving moral conundrums, can be understood as both inspiring, and allowing audiences to experience, the process of making moral choices, and thus *phronesis*. Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 15–17. As Allen states: "Aristotelian *phronesis* or practical wisdom is based upon the good judgment of individuals, which is produced and refined by successive moral choices, whereby contingent circumstances produce specific actions. By gaining experience in the process of moral choice, one practices *phronesis*, which is understood not as the completed or fulfilled achievement of virtue but the application of goodness in the process of living." Allen, 16. Emotions, with all of their messy contingency, form a part of an individual's ethical response to the world in Aristotle's theories, and can be evoked by moral questions in books. Allen, 14, 16. Moral choices performed in response to one's reading can thus give one experience in *phronesis* just as well as moral choices undertaken in response to the contingencies of one's particular life.

her, and to use their own prudence to direct their behaviors and their choices.[98]

In order to analyze the ways in which Christine de Pizan cultivates readerly identification in this work, I will begin, as de Pizan does, with the Princess.[99] As the figure whose behavior and internal life occupy the largest portion of the text, the Princess is a prominent subject for readerly identification, perhaps most immediately and obviously for the identification of noble readers. By describing the Princess in the midst of her particular circumstances, de Pizan encourages her likewise privileged readers to see themselves in her. And by illustrating the princess's struggles, emotions, and internal dialogue in great detail, de Pizan also encourages all of her readers, regardless of class, to follow along with the Princess as she learns.

As when describing Christine in the *Cité des dames*, de Pizan begins by locating the Princess in her familiar surroundings. We are introduced to the Princess in her room, as she wakes up and finds herself in her bed. After describing the Princess's immediate environment, de Pizan transitions into her thoughts as Temptation speaks to her and appeals seductively to details of her accustomed experience. De Pizan then goes on to relate in detail the kinds of things that Temptation says to the Princess to encourage her to

---

[98] As Allyson Carr argues about de Pizan's goals in the *Avision-Christine*: "Christine is trying to teach her readers . . . appropriate action in their context: they are to see themselves in the story and from that be moved to extrapolate how they should act outside the story, in their lives." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 164. Indeed, Carr argues that by encouraging readers to see themselves in her works, de Pizan works to give them opportunities for *phronesis*. Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 180, 207–8. For further discussion of the ways in which Christine de Pizan empowers her readers to use their rational faculties to improve their lives, see: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 180–82, 188; and Guarinos, "Individualisme et solidarité," 89–90.

[99] While de Pizan begins by stating that she is describing the life of a "princepce ou haulte dame" ["princess or high-born lady"], in the following sections of Part 1, she almost always refers to and explicitly describes the experiences of a princess rather than a noble lady. *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 12; Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 6. Hence, I will focus on her depiction of this hypothetical princess, rather than applying every description to a princess *or* noblewoman, since de Pizan does not do so herself.

be prideful, vindictive, and greedy. Thus she relates:

> Quant la princepce ou haulte dame sera en son lit au matin veilliee de somme et elle
> se verra couchiee en son lit entre souefs draps, avironnee de riches paremens et de
> toutes choses pour aise de corps, dames et damoiselles entour elle qui l'ueil n'ont a
> aultre chose fors a avisier que riens ne lui faille de tous delices, prestes de courir a
> elle se elle souspire tant soit petit ou se elle sonne mot, les genoulx flechis pour lui
> administrer tout service et obeir a tous ses commandemens, adonc souventes fois
> avendra que temptacion l'assauldra, qui chantera tel leçon:[100]

> ["When the princess or high-born lady wakes up in the morning, she sees herself
> lying luxuriously in her bed between soft sheets, surrounded by rich accouterments
> and everything for bodily comfort, and ladies-in-waiting around her focusing all
> their attention on her and seeing that she lacks for nothing, ready to run to her if she
> gives the least sigh or if she breathes a word, their knees flexed to administer any
> service to her and obey her commands. And so it often happens that Temptation will
> assail her, singing sweetly [such a lesson]."][101]

Temptation comes upon the princess in a place she knows, as it often ("souventes") does,[102]

and when speaking to the princess, it weaves other elements of her familiar experience into

its blandishments, evoking her habits, her tastes, her convictions, and her environment.[103]

The purpose of these details is recognition—the noble reader is invited to recognize in the

princess's surroundings and entourage aspects of her own, and to hear in the familiar voice

of Temptation the way she speaks to herself in the privacy of her mind.[104] Indeed, having

---

[100] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 12.

[101] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 6.

[102] It is unclear whether de Pizan means to convey that temptation often comes to princesses, or
that it comes to this particular princess often. Either way, it is an experience that the members of
her audience are likely to have had.

[103] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, pp. 12-13.

[104] For an interesting discussion of a similar "mirror-effect" that Christine de Pizan creates for
Queen Isabel of Bavaria by including a miniature that accurately depicted Queen Isabel's chambers
in the frontispiece of the Book of the Queen, see: Walters, "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom," 232. As
Walters argues, by producing this initial sense of mirroring, Christine de Pizan marks her authorial

described the Princess's experiences with Temptation, de Pizan expresses her conviction that she has illustrated a scene that will be familiar to her upper-class readers. As the Three Virtues state: "Toutes les choses dessus dictes, ou les semblables, sont les mets que temptacion administre a toute creature vivant en aise et delices" ["All the above-mentioned things or similar ones are the dishes that Temptation sets before everyone who lives a life of ease and pleasure"].[105] By presenting the affluent women in her audience with a character who lives as they do, thinks as they do, and is tempted in much the same way as they are, she encourages them to identify with her.

These inducements to identification continue as de Pizan dramatizes the Princess's conversion from a life of unreflective sin to a life of conscious virtue. After describing the princess's temptation, de Pizan relates how the "good princess," when she feels herself tempted, will listen to "l'amour et craintte de Nostre Seigneur" [The Love and Fear of Our Lord], an allegorical representation of divine inspiration who speaks to the princess in her mind.[106] Because the princess has forgotten her nature, the Love and Fear of Our Lord seeks to show her to herself as she really is, describing her as wretched, mortal, full of sin and no better than a poor woman clothed in coarse clothing.[107] Initially, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the princess cannot recognize herself in this description. Once The Love and Fear of Our Lord provides her with details in which she can see herself,

---

persona as a "mirror" for the queen, in the sense of an "exemplary model guiding Ysabel's own trajectory of self-improvement through reading." Walters, 232.

[105] *Trois vertus* 1.4, p. 14; Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 7.

[106] *Trois vertus* 1.4, p. 14.

[107] *Trois vertus* 1.4, p. 14.

however—namely by mentioning her pride, her surroundings, some of the ways she might think about herself, and her knowledge of scripture—the princess responds intensely to his words, exclaiming that she knows that Pride is the root of vice, and that she can recognize it in herself. Having done so, she begins to describe some of the sinful behaviors into which her pride has led her.[108] Recognizing an element of her own life in the Love and Fear of Our Lord's description leads her recognize the sin in herself and to draw further connections between his description and her own habitual behavior.

Hearing this, the Love and Fear of Our Lord begins to give her even more personal details of how she thinks and how she acts, reframing her habitual experience in terms of sin and vileness so that she may realize what she has become. He describes her accustomed thoughts and feelings, her behavior towards others, her internal dialogue, her desire for riches, her idle ways, and other recognizable details of her life. And his words are effective, for once he has left the princess, she does indeed begin to see herself as wretched and desire to change.

By dramatizing the princess's experience of recognition and providing a variety of details about how she thinks and acts, de Pizan gives her readers opportunities to experience the same crisis of recognition and conversion. If readers have indeed heard the voice of temptation as the princess has and lived in a similar environment to her, then they may well have spoken to themselves as she has, acted as she has, and struggled and suffered as she has. They may, like the princess, have resented the women who disobeyed them, feared to be surpassed by others, grown bored with all but the newest dishes, or told

---

[108] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 15.

themselves that their own pleasure was their most important concern.[109] In these and other images, presented to her by the Love and Fear of Our Lord, the princess sees her own experience, reflected back to her as in a distorted mirror. And if readers have had some of the same experiences as the princess, then they, too, will see in these images reflections of their own sins. The result is a kind of double-identification, as readers simultaneously recognize themselves in the images provided by the Love and Fear of Our Lord and recognize themselves in the image of the princess recognizing herself.[110]

By facilitating this layered identification, de Pizan draws her readers into the text, crafting an experience that will allow them to learn as the princess learns. As the princess recognizes herself, so do they. As the princess feels fear and revulsion, so should they. And as the princess learns how to do better, they are exposed to the same lessons as she is, at the same time as she is, as well as her thoughts and feelings about these lessons.

Indeed, after dramatizing the princess's crisis of recognition, de Pizan proceeds to walk her readers through the princess's internal dialogue as she reflects on what she has learned from The Love and Fear of Our Lord, considering it in light of the lessons that "Saincte Informacion" [Holy Information] teaches her. Readers are able to witness the princess's fear and internal conflict as she applies the judgments she has heard to herself and decides to mend her ways. They are able to watch as she contemplates her options and

---

[109] *Trois vertus*, 1.3, p. 1.4

[110] The second-person voice of this figure may also, as Karen Pratt argues, help to draw readers into the text by making them feel as though they are "being personally spoken to." As she argues: "In the *Trois vertus* Christine employs a number of strategies to introduce the second-person form of address, and this technique, along with quite colloquial, familiar language makes the reader feel directly targeted by a friendly, yet persuasive voice." Karen Pratt, "The Context of Christine's *Livre des trois vertus*: Exploiting and Rewriting Tradition," in *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, vol. 3 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), 682.

considers what she has learned in the past about the two ways of life that lead to salvation: the active and the contemplative. And perhaps most critically, they are shown how she shapes the lessons she has learned to herself with her reason and self-knowledge: in a word, how she uses her prudence. Indeed, the princess's exercise of her faculties reads, in many ways, like a replica of the definitions Christine de Pizan gives of Prudence in her *Livre de prod'homie/prudence* and her *Livre de paix*.[111] I quote these definitions at length below, because it is essential to understand how de Pizan defines these concepts in order to understand how the Princess is exercising them.

In the *Livre de prudence*, Christine de Pizan defines Prudence as "disceptacion de bonnes et de mauvaises choses en la fuite du mal et en l'election du bien" ["the discernment of good and evil things, in the flight from evil and the choice of the good."].[112] In the later *Livre de paix*, this responsibility is given to Discretion, the "mere et conduisarresse et toute la premiere des vertus" ["mother and guide of all the virtues, and also the first among

---

[111] I draw from both of these works in defining Christine de Pizan's depiction of Prudence in the *Trois vertus*, because even though the *Livre de prod'homie* (c. 1405) (later modified and retitled as the *Livre de prudence*) is more contemporary to the the *Trois vertus* (c. 1404-1405) than the later Livre de paix (c. 1412-1413), some of the concepts related to prudence that Christine de Pizan brings up in the *Trois vertus* are elaborated in more detail in the *Livre de paix* than in the *Livre de prod'homie*. In addition, the *Livre de prod'homie/prudence* does not currently exist in an edited form, and only select passages have been published outside of manuscript form. In citing the *Livre de prudence/prod'homie*, I refer to Kate Langdon Forhan's excerpt and translation of de Pizan's definition of Prudence, published in *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*. For the full passage, see: Kate Langdon Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 106–7, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015054447688. In order to clarify how Christine de Pizan is treating prudence in the *Trois vertus*, I will also cite passages from the *Livre de paix* when they are relevant.

[112] Forhan, 106n90, 106. When giving excerpts from the *Livre de prod'homie/prudence*, I will first cite the footnote where one can find Forhan's Middle French edition of Christine de Pizan's definition of Prudence in the *Livre de prod'homie/prudence*, and then the page number where Forhan's translation of this passage can be found. All translations of the *Livre de prod'homie/prudence* cited in this chapter are Forhan's.

them"],[113] which allows one to distinguish good and evil and choose the good.[114] The

element of choice in prudence/discretion is critical, for as de Pizan makes clear, it is not

sufficient to know the difference between good and evil if one chooses evil.[115] Rather, one

must both desire the good and seek to understand it. Indeed, in the *Livre de paix*, de Pizan

explicitly defines Prudence as the desire to know God, to learn what deeds conduce to

salvation, and to perform them.[116] Without the desire for the good, combined with the

ability to distinguish it from evil, one cannot live morally, or prudently, in the world.

Christine de Pizan further divides Prudence, in the *Livre de prudence*, into eight

faculties, some of which she combines or reassigns in the Livre de paix, but all of which are

crucial to her understanding of what constitutes prudent behavior. These eight parts are

---

[113] Christine de Pizan, "*Le Livre de paix*," in *The Book of Peace*, ed. Karen Green et al., by Christine de Pizan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 1.5 p. 209, https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14; Karen Green et al., trans., "*The Book of Peace*," in *The Book of Peace*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. Karen Green et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 1.5 p. 68, https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14. Both the Middle French edition of the *Livre de paix* and the English translation of this work that I am using in this chapter come from the same volume, an excellent scholarly edition and translation of the *Livre de paix*, cited above. When giving excerpts from the *Livre de paix*, I will first cite the Middle French edition of the work, and then the page number where the published translation of this passage can be found. All translations of the *Livre de paix* quoted in this chapter come from the edition of *The Book of Peace* cited in this note.

[114] In the *Livre de paix*, this desire to do good is also taken up by Reason, the daughter of Discretion, whose role: "sert de partir esgal- ment toutes choses: c'est assavoir elle veult que les bons soient meritez et les mauvais pugnis et que ordre soit mis en toutes les euvres que elle dispose" ["is to distribute all things equally: she wishes that the good be rewarded and the bad punished, and that all the works she accomplishes be in good order."] de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 p. 209; Green et al., trans., *The Book of Peace*, 1.5 p. 69. Prudence, identified in the *Paix* as Reason's daughter, is the virtue that helps one keep one's life in the order desired by Reason. de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 p. 209.

[115] Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, 106n90, 106.

[116] de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 p. 209.

"Entendement, Providence, Circonspection, Prudence en Docilité, Caucion, Intelligence, Memoire" ["Understanding, Foresight, Circumspection, Prudence in Meekness, Caution, Intelligence, Memory"].[117] De Pizan defines Understanding as "jugement, advis et comprehension des choses que on doit faire" ["judgement, examination, and comprehension of the things one ought to do"]: in essence, the ability to understand, in any given scenario, what actions are correct to take.[118] Foresight constitutes the faculty "par laquele on conjecture et extime les choses a venir selon les passees, et les signes que on voit" ["by which one assesses and anticipates things to come according to the past and the signs one sees.][119] In the *Livre de paix*, this ability to observe the past and the present in order to plan for the future is combined with Circumspection, which de Pizan defines in the *Livre de prudence* as "cautele a cognoistre les choses contraires et qui peuent nuire; et aussi advisier celles qui peuent valoir et qui enseignent la voie de fuir le vice d'avarice, et aussi prodigalité ou fole largesce" ["shrewedness [sic] in recognizing opposing things and those that can harm, and also to see those [things] which could have value and which teach the way to flee the vice of avarice and also prodigality and foolish largesse"].[120] In the *Livre de paix*, she elaborates upon this to mark Circumspection as the virtue by which one is able to understand one's motives, consider whether or not they are good, and to act on them. It also encompasses the deliberation whereby, prior to taking an action, one considers one's ability to take the action one desires, what assistance one might have in taking it, what

---

[117] Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, 106n90, 106.

[118] Forhan, 106n90, 106.

[119] Forhan, 106n90, 106.

[120] Forhan, 106n90, 106.

obstacles stand in one's way, and what the results of taking this action might be, as well as

to consider the past, the present, and the future in making one's decisions.[121]

Meekness, the fourth aspect of Prudence, constitutes "pouoir d'informer et

introduire soy et autrui par vraie doctrine" ["the power to educate and instruct oneself and

others in true doctrine"].[122] Caution, for its part, is a faculty of discernment, granted to

Discretion in the Livre de paix, which allows one "appercevoir les vices qui se cueuvrent

soubz umbre de vertu" ["to perceive the vices that hide under the appearance of virtue"].[123]

Intelligence constitutes the knowledge that allows one to discriminate between good and

evil: "clere cognoissance des premiers principes et de leurs causes (c'est a dire de Dieu et

des Ydees et de la Premiere Matere, et des substances esperitueles et incorporeles)" ["the

clear knowledge of first principles and their causes, that is, of God and of Ideas and of Prime

Matter and of spiritual and incorporeal substances"].[124] Finally, Memory, which enables one

to remember what one has learned and use it in making prudent decisions in the future, is

"une vertu naturele, ordenee pour retenir fermement les choses veues et comprises" ["a

natural virtue ordained to retain firmly things seen and understood"]: both what one has

experienced personally and what one has understood from other sources.[125]

---

[121] de Pizan, "*Le Livre de paix*," 1.5 p. 210.

[122] Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, 106n90, 106.

[123] Forhan, 106n90, 106.

[124] Forhan, 106n90, 106.

[125] Forhan, 107n90, 106. In the *Livre de paix*, both of these faculties are encompassed, albeit with a difference, by Understanding, which de Pizan defines as: "puissance et operacion de l'ame, si que dit Saint Augustin, de Dieu donné singulierement plus grant es uns hommes que es autres, (fol. 8v) est son commencement; l'of ce de cest entendement est d'ymaginer toutes choses veues ou non veues; selon la quantité de sa force pour lesquelles ymaginacions par bien investiguer est engendree

Together these faculties constitute the pre-requisites for moral action in the world—for the exercise of prudence in all of one's deeds. And these are the faculties that readers witness the Princess exercising as she considers how she should act in light of what she has learned. Reeling from the shock of what the Love and Fear of Our Lord has said to her, the Princess takes time to ponder what he has told her, so that she may Understand it.[126] Following this, she begins to exhibit her Prudence, Understanding, Meekness, and Discretion, inasmuch as she begins to distinguish between good and bad behavior and to consider what does and does not tend towards her salvation. She contemplates what it means to be damned, contrasts the state of damnation with the state of salvation, and as a result of this emotionally-charged reflection, she resolves to seek salvation.[127]

Having decided on a course of action, she still needs to consider how she should accomplish it. For this, she needs to take stock of both her past knowledge and her present circumstances in order to plan for the future and exercise her Foresight. Thus, using her Understanding, Meekness, and Memory, which have allowed her to internalize true doctrine, she considers the two paths that she has learned lead to God, the active and the contemplative life. After outlining for herself what each of these paths consist of, she realizes that she needs to make another decision: which path to take. In order to guide her

congnoissance, laquelle s'aproche plus des choses ouvrales, c'est assavoir des choses que on veult mectre a euvre, congnoistre et entendre les manieres de les faire et entreprendre." ["a power and activity of the soul, as Saint Augustine observes, given by God individually to some men more than to others. The role of this understanding is to imagine everything seen and unseen; according to the capacity of this imagination to investigate well, knowledge is engendered. This knowledge brings a closer understanding of practical things; that is to say, of things one wants to achieve, and understanding of how to achieve them"]. de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 pp. 208-209; Green et al., trans., *The Book of Peace*, 1.5 p. 68.

[126] *Trois vertus*, 1.5, pp. 20-22.

[127] *Trois vertus*, 1.5, pp. 20-22.

decision, she explicitly states that she will rely on her Discretion, stating:

> Il est dit communement, et il est vray, que discrecion est mere des vertus. Et pour quoy est elle mere? Pour ce que elle conduit et meine les aultres; et qui n'entreprent par elle quelconque chose que l'en veult faire, tout l'ouvrage vient a neant et est de nul preu. Pour ce m'est necessaire ouvrer par discrecion.

> ["It is commonly said, and it is true, that Discretion is the mother of the virtues. And why is she the mother? Because she guides and sustains the others, and anyone who fails to do any undertaking through her will find that all the work comes to nothing and is of no effect." [Thus it is necessary for me to act with discretion].][128]

Here, then, we see that the princess is approaching her decision in the right way, with the guidance of a virtue that is, depending on the text, either the mother of Prudence or coextensive with it. Discretion leads her to a process of detailed circumspection, and there we see the Princess truly beginning to use her Prudence to adapt the lessons she has learned to herself and to her circumstances. As she says:

> C'est que je doy avisier ains que je entrepreingne quelconque chose, premierement la force ou foiblece de mon propre corps | et la fragilité en quoy je suis encline, aussi a quel subgection il convient que je obeisse selon l'estat ou Dieu en ce monde m'a appellee et commise. Et se je considere au vray ces choses, je me treuve, quelque bonne voulenté que je aye, tres foible de corps pour souffrir grant abstinence et grant peine, et foible d'esperit par fragilité et inconstance ; et quant je me sens telle, je ne doy mie presumer de moy meismes que je soye de tel vertu, nonobstant que Dieux dist : Tu lairas pere et mere pour mon nom, — que je me peusse du tout disposer a ce et laissier mary, enfans, estat mondain, et toutes occupacions terriennes pour entendre du tout a servir Dieu en la vie contemplative, si comme ont fait les plus perfaictes creatures. Si ne doy entreprendre chose, ou le perseverer je ne pense souffire.
> Que feray je doncques?[129]

> ["This is what I must consider before I undertake anything at all.
> "First I ought to think of the strength or weakness of my poor[130] body and the

---

[128] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 16. Lawson's translation is a bit different from the original here, so I have added my own translation in brackets to the end of hers.

[129] *Trois vertus*, 1.7, p. 26.

[130] According the Middle French edition I am using (ed. Willard and Hicks), this would be better translated as "my own body," since de Pizan's word is "propre." It is possible that the manuscripts

frailty to which I am inclined, and also of what level of submission it is appropriate for me to assume, according to the estate where God has called me and which He has entrusted to me in this world. If I consider these things, honestly, I will find that although I have some good intentions, I am too weak to suffer great abstinence and great pain, and my spirit is weak through frailty and inconstancy. And since I feel myself to be like that, I should not imagine that I am more virtuous than I am, even though God says, "You must forsake father and mother for my name." I'm afraid that I would not at all be able to fulfil my pledge and leave husband, children, everyday life, and all worldly concerns with the hope of serving only God, as women of the greatest perfection have done, Therefore I should not attempt something I wouldn't be able to persevere with. What shall I do then?"][131]

The princess's detailed recital of her thoughts is a striking example of Circumspection, as defined in both the *Livre de prudence* and the *Livre de paix*. The princess considers her strengths and her weaknesses, the ability she has to achieve her goal and the obstacles that might hold her back. She checks her motives and finds them good, although she worries that she may not have the power to act on them. She considers her social class and how this constrains her choices, as do the worldly connections she feels to the people in her family. And when she still cannot make a decision, she calls upon the past to guide her, an action the Livre de paix refers to as "prepenser les choses passees es semblables cas et y prendre exemple" ["to weigh up what has happened in similar cases in the past" [and take example from them]],[132] as she listens to Holy Information, who reminds her that anyone can be

Lawson is working from rendered the word as "povre," however, since her original translation was based on a 16th-century printed edition of the text, as well as British Library Add. 15641, although she revised in light of the Willard and Hicks edition once it was published. Sarah Lawson, "Introduction to the Revised Edition," in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*, by Christine de Pizan, Revised Edition, Trans. Sarah Lawson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), xxviii–xxix.

[131] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 16-17.

[132] de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 p. 210; Green et al., trans., *The Book of Peace*, 1.5 p. 70. I have added, in brackets, a translation of the last part of de Pizan's description, because the translators abbreviate the quotation slightly.

saved, regardless of their station in life, and who calls upon her to think of the kings and

queens of the past who ruled with virtue and ended up becoming saints.[133] In reflecting in

this way, she also considers "l'estre du temps present pour bien se disposer" [how she

"might make good use of present circumstances"] by considering the social position in

which she finds herself.[134]

Having considered all these things, the princess finally resolves to choose a path to

salvation that combines the active and the contemplative life. As she tells herself: "je voy

bien que puisque je ne me sens de tel force que puisse du tout en tout eslire et suivre l'une |

des deux susdictes voyes, je mettray peine a tout le moins de tenir le moyen, si comme saint

Pol le conseille, et prendray de l'une et de l'autre vie selon ma possibilité le plus que je

pourray." ["I see very well that, as I do not feel myself to be the sort of person who can

wholeheartedly choose and follow one of these two lives, I will try hard at least to strike a

happy medium, as St Paul counsels, and take as much as I can from both lives according to

my ability."][135]

Along with the princess, then, readers are guided through the process of shaping the

lessons they have learned to their own circumstances and using this self-knowledge to

consider how they should act. As Rosalind Brown-Grant argues:

---

[133] *Trois vertus*, 1.7, pp. 27-28.

[134] de Pizan, "*Le Livre de paix*," 1.5 p. 210; Green et al., "*The Book of Peace*," 1.5 p. 70. As Collette
argues, it is the social dimension of prudence that Christine de Pizan emphasizes the most in the
Trois vertus, with prudence, for the princess, constituting the cultivation of "a prudential habit of
mind that continually assays, weighs, and checks to maintain the strength of the webs of affinity and
influence that a woman constructs and which are constructed around her in her social world."
Collette, "Mapping the Routes to Agency," 37.

[135] *Trois vertus*, 1.7, p. 28; Lawson, trans., *Long Learning*, p. 18.

Christine's use of psychomachia functions not only to provide a dramatic approach but also to reveal, step by step, the rational processes involved in deciding upon a virtuous course of action . . . By shifting from the direct discourse delivered by the authoritative voice of the three Virtues to that offered by the personifications in the psychomachia and thence to the dialogue of the beleaguered princess with herself, the *Trois Vertus* demonstrates the various stages involved in exercising one's own free will and rationality.[136]

Readers watch as, step by step, the princess uses her faculty of prudence to come to a rational, moral, and personally viable decision that applies the teachings of the Love and Fear of our Lord to the concrete circumstances of her daily life and her sense of her own identity. And following this, Christine de Pizan grants her readers a series of descriptions showing exactly how the Princess acts on the choices she has made. They see how the princess will comport herself with poise and humility, how she will use her compassionate feelings to motivate her in promoting diplomacy and giving charity, and how she will both seek good counsel and give it, using her reason and rhetoric to advocate for the good.[137]

This process is repeated again when the princess encounters the allegorical figure of "Prudence Mondaine" (Worldly Prudence), whose title makes explicit the implicit virtues that the princess was exercising in response to the Love and Fear of Our Lord.[138] Prudence teaches the princess, via a kind of Socratic dialogue, how it is good to behave morally, how moral behavior gives one a good reputation, and how the preservation of one's reputation and honor should be one's constant goal.[139] Following this, in even greater detail than

---

[136] Brown-Grant, *Moral defence*, 189-92.

[137] *Trois vertus*, 1.8-1.10. In doing these things, the princess is able to maintain not only her virtue, but the appearance of virtue, which is essential for her to preserve her social reputation and thus her social power. Collette, "Mapping the Routes to Agency," 31–32.

[138] *Trois vertus*, 1.11, 41.

[139] *Trois vertus*, 1.11, 41.

before, one sees elaborated both the lessons that Prudence teaches the princess and how the princess applies them, in every minute of every day and in every area of her life.[140]

The result of this is to present readers with a kind of personal guide for how they may think, feel, and behave in similar circumstances.[141] By following along with the princess's inner dialogue, both intellectually and emotionally, they are able to experience how the strategies she applies lift the weight of sin from her. By seeing how the princess applies the lessons she has learned, they are empowered to recognize the actions they might take in similar circumstances. And by seeing themselves in the princess, recognizing that like her they are steeped in sin, they encouraged to recognize that like her, they have within themselves the tools they need to improve themselves: the Love and Fear of Our Lord, Worldly Prudence, Discretion, Circumspection, and the Understanding that allows them to put these things into action.[142]

---

[140] *Trois vertus*, 1.11-1.21.

[141] For an interpretation of the words of the Love and Fear of Christ as a kind of personal script for the princess, a "model speech" that she can use "to ward off temptation," see: Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," 510.

[142] Indeed, what Christine de Pizan emphasizes in this work, as Marion Guarinos argues, is each woman's status as an individual capable of moral judgment and self-improvement. As Guarinos states:

> il est rappelé à la femme du *Livre des Trois Vertus* qu'elle est un individu responsable de sa conduite morale, capable de discerner le bien et le mal et de choisir en conséquence la voie qu'elle souhait suivre . . . si la femme peu vertueuse ou encline au péché existe dans le *Livre des III Vertus*, Christine souligne que ceci ne constitue ni une règle, ni une fatalité sans issue, que la femme est un individu perfectible et doit faire appel à sa volonté pour se détourner du mauvais chemin"

> [The woman of the *Book of the Three Virtues* is reminded that she is an individual responsible for her moral conduct, capable of distinguishing good and evil and choosing the path that she wishes to follow accordingly . . . if the woman who is less virtuous or inclined to sin exists in the *Book of the Three Virtues*, Christine emphasizes that this does not

Although they are invited to imitate the princess in this way, however, the lesson they are to learn is not to replicate what the princess does exactly. For if there were any difference between themselves and the princess, any divergence in their circumstances, then the conclusions the princess comes to would not apply to them. They might not be as restricted by the ties of family, and thus more able to retire into the solitude of the contemplative life. They might not have a husband as powerful as the princess's, and thus the advice regarding diplomacy might not apply to them. Were a reader to attempt to act like a princess in a very different set of circumstances, the results would be far from prudent.[143]

What readers are to recognize, instead, is how it feels to consider one's actions in light of morality, in light of one's class, in light of the thousand contingencies of their daily lives. Experiencing along with the princess, they are able to add the fusion of their experiences and hers to their memories of past events, and these memories become a resource they can draw on when making decisions in the future. The lesson is not to imitate the princess in every deed, but rather to experience what it is like to make a good decision, to recognize in themselves the resources they can use to make these decisions, and thus to

constitute a rule, nor an inescapable fate, that the woman is a perfectible individual and must call upon her will to turn away from the wrong path.] Guarinos, "Individualisme et solidarité," 89–90.

The woman of the work has, in essence, "toutes les qualités requises pour s'introspecter, faire des choix, lutter contre la tentation." [all of the requisite qualities for introspection, making choices, and fighting against temptation]. Guarinos, 98.

[143] Allyson Carr remarks on the folly of this kind of imitation when discussing the kind of phronetic activity it is best for readers to perform in response to their reading: "If, for example, I were to decide to take Christine's stories as a set of specific instructions or blueprints for my life and actions, I would not be engaged in phronetic reading (because much of the specifics of her stories would not be at all appropriate to my context)." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 210.

become empowered to do so in their particular contexts, whatever they may be. Much as prudence guides the princess, so, too, can readers, once they have discovered this faculty in themselves, use it to engage in the same kinds of reflection that the princess does, considering what the right course of action is and how to apply the lessons they learn to their own particular lives. [144]

This personal application is key. For even though same core lessons, according to Prudence, are necessary for all women who seek to live virtuously, de Pizan makes it clear that Prudence shapes her advice to individual readers' circumstances.[145] When responding to a potential objection to her teachings, for example, she considers the possibility of a princess whose husband is so restrictive and controlling that she cannot freely visit her subjects or give charity as Prudence recommends. In answer, the Three Virtues state:

> "nous n'entendons mie de celles qui sont gardees par telles extremittés, car aux princepces et dames ou autres tenues en tel servage Prudence ne puet donner autre enseignement – et si n'est il pas petit—ne mais prendre en pacience et faire tousjours bien a leur pouoir, et obeir pour avoir paix"[146]

> [we are not speaking of those who are guarded to such an extreme, because to those princesses or ladies or others who are held in such servitude, Prudence can give no other lesson—although it is not a small one—but to take things with patience, and to always do what good is in their power, and to obey in order to have peace].

While the example of the good princess is good to imitate, then, the core lesson of this work

---

[144] As Sylvia Nagel argues: "Just as the speech of the princess continues the greater dialogue of the work as a soliloquy or internal monologue, and just as the reporting of the teachings of Worldly Prudence represents an interiorization of a learning process, Christine intends her work to provoke a similar internal monologue in her readers." Nagel, "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*," 513. Roberta Krueger comments likewise: "The frequent internal conversations that the hypothetical characters conduct with themselves about points of doctrine portray the dilemma of an emerging female subject in a way that invites the reader's inner reflection." Krueger, "Chascune selon son estat," 30.

[145] *Trois vertus*, 1.13 p. 52.

[146] *Trois vertus*, 1.21 p. 81.

is for its readers to listen to the teachings of Prudence as they pertain to their own lives.

In dramatizing the Princess's conversion, de Pizan thus works to enable her readers to see themselves in her, both so that they may recognize their own failings and so that they may recognize their own virtues. Through the mediation of the princess, they may gain practice in prudence—understanding not simply what it is right to do, but "what right action *feels* like."[147]And they may use these resources as the princess does in directing their own lives, regardless of what class they come from.

For as mentioned above, de Pizan does not intend to only benefit princesses through her work. The Three Virtues state repeatedly that the lessons the princess learns and the resources she uses are intended to be valuable to all. When discussing the lessons of Prudence for princesses, for example, they state:

> . . . si nous plaist encores aviser pour leur enortement sept principaulx enseignemens lesquelz, selon Prudence, leur affierent et sont necessaires a celles qui desirent sagement vivre et honneur veulent avour. Si prions et enjoignons a elles, et semblablement a toutes femmes grandes, moyennes et petites a qui ce pourra apertenir, que ces sept enseignemens veullent bien retenir, noter et mettre | a effect; car pour neant ot doctrine, qui ne la met a oeuvre.

> [We would also like to present for their guidance seven principal lessons that, according to Prudence, are relevant to them and are necessary for those who desire to live wisely and wish to have honor. So we implore and command them, and likewise all women: high, middle, and low, to whom this can pertain, that they will remember, note, and put into effect these seven lessons, because a doctrine is worth nothing to those who do not put it into action.][148]

Likewise, they state that the Love and Fear of Our Lord is beneficial to all women, and that it is: "aussi bien et semblablement affiert aux | dames, damoiselles et autres avoir prudence mondaine pour ordonner en guise deue leur maniere de vivre, chascune selon son estat, et

---

[147] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 169.

[148] *Trois vertus*, 1.13, p. 52.

qu'elles aiment honneur, le bien de renommee et de bon los que aux princepces appartient." ["just as applicable to ladies, maidens, and other women to have worldly prudence in regulating their lives well, each according to her estate, and to love honour and the blessing of a good reputation."].[149] The princess's discovery of her own resources for change, and the way she shapes the lessons she learns to her own needs, is meant as a lesson for all women, not only for princesses. All may learn regulate their own lives, according to their particular estates and their particular sense of prudence.

It is true that many of the specific details of the Princess's environment and temptations would not apply to women of a significantly lower class, a disjunction that might hamper readerly identification. Many women could not order whatever foods or gowns they pleased, command an army of serving-women, or wake up surrounded by luxury. As a result, their struggles and temptations might be different than the Princess's. That being said, the degree to which de Pizan humanizes the Princess does offer access points, even to readers that are very different from her. Because readers can see the way Temptation draws on the specific details of the Princess's life in order to lead her to sin, for example, they may be able to recognize similar patterns in the way that temptation speaks to them. They may share with the Princess the visceral sense that they have erred and endangered their souls, even if they have not done so in the same way she has. And by making it clear that the Princess is human, both by showing her flaws and subjecting her to the chastisement of the Love and Fear of Our Lord, de Pizan encourages her readers to see her as someone, although placed in a high estate, who is, on the level of her body and soul, akin to them. As The Love and Fear of Our Lord tells the princess: "En petit d'eure avoyes

---

149 Trois vertus, 2.1 pp. 122-23; Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 88.

oublié cognoiscence de toy meismes! Ne sces tu que tu es une miserable creature, fresle et

subgiecte a toutes enfermetéz, et a toutes passions, maladies et aultres douleurs que corps

mortel puet souffrir?" [In a short time you have forgotten your understanding of yourself!

Do you not know that you are a wretched creature, frail and subject to all of the infirmities,

passions, maladies, and other pains that a mortal body can suffer?][150] Even if the Princess

has forgotten, if her readers can recognize a common humanity in her, then they may be

able to see themselves reflected in her. And the resources the princess has are those they,

by virtue of their shared humanity, may also recognize in themselves. As Rosalind Brown-

Grant puts it: "the lesson delivered to the princess underlines her similarity with other

women as a lowly human soul and thus proposes her as a model for all womankind,

exhorting her to become a visible *exemplum* of all virtues."[151]

---

[150] *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 14.

[151] Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 192. The fact that Christine de Pizan represents the princess in various life situations, as a young unmarried woman, a wife, and a widow, also expands readerly opportunities for identification. As Jean-Claude Mühlethaler puts it: "elle saisit la princesse aussi bien dans sa réalité de femme mariée que de veuve, lui offrant ainsi un statut d'exemplarité en fonction de situations vécues, dans lesquelles toutes ses lectrices pouvaient se reconnaître en découvrant leur véritable dignité, leur majesté de femmes." [she captures the princess as much in her reality as a married woman as in her reality as a widow, thus offering her an exemplary status as a function of lived circumstances, in which all of her female readers can recognize themselves, discovering their true dignity, their feminine majesty]. Mühlethaler, "'Traictier de vertu au profit d'ordre de vivre': relire l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan à la lumière des miroirs des princes," 596. Indeed, as Xiangyun Zhang puts it:

> Les préceptes que les princesses reçoivent de Raison, Justice et Droiture dans le livre de Christine, constituent évidemment un enseignement qu'elles doivent d'abord suivre elles-mêmes. Mais elles peuvent très bien s'en servir pour éduquer ou diriger leurs suivantes, puisque toutes les femmes peuvent rencontrer des problèmes identiques : comment agir envers son mari, et comment maintenir de bonnes relations avec autrui face à ceux et celles qui n'auraient aucune sympathie pour la dame et qui seraient ses ennemis déclarés." [The precepts that princesses receive from Reason, Justice, and Rectitude in Christine's book clearly constitute a lesson that they must first follow themselves. But they can very well use it to educate or direct their followers, since all women can encounter the same problems: how to act towards her husband, and how to maintain good relations with others

Because prudence is, at its core, grounded in the particular, de Pizan does not stop

at inviting readers of other classes to see themselves in the princess, however. Rather, she

also takes steps to provide them with class-specific images with which they may have an

easier time identifying, and from which they may, like the princess, learn prudence. For

although virtue, understood in the abstract, may be objective, the individual textures of

people's daily lives are very much shaped by class, by gender, by the spaces in which they

live and the people with whom they surround themselves. It is in recognition of this fact

that Christine de Pizan provides the diverse range of models that she does. Throughout her

work, she displays a profound concern with the ways the intersecting categories of age,

class, and gender shape the environments and experiences of the women she depicts. And

her concern with details, differences, and why these things matter leads her to craft images

of women that facilitate identification, by virtue of the way they are grounded in the real.[152]

One can see this concern with detail and accuracy in the way she differentiates her

lessons based on what she knows about how women's contexts influence their lives.[153]

---

in the face of those who would have no sympathy for the lady and who would be her declared enemies.]

Xiangyun Zhang, "Christine de Pizan: La communauté des femmes et l'ordre social," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 553.

[152] For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's concern with the representation of reality in this work, see: Lorcin, "Christine de Pizan analyste de la société," 203.

[153] As Lorcin notes, "Les reproches qu'elle fait aux uns et aux autres concernent parfois des défauts liés à la condition sociale. Elle met en garde la princesse contre l'orgeuil, les dames de cour contre l'envie, les servantes et les paysannes contre la malhonnêteté. Ce sont là des fautes 'professionelles,' en quelque sorte. D'autres ne sont pas liées à la fonction, mais plutôt au genre de vie et à la fortune" (204) (The reproaches that she gives to them sometimes concern faults linked to social condition. She warns the princess against pride, ladies of the court against envy, servants and peasants against dishonesty. These are the "professional" faults, in a way. Others are not linked to function, but

When giving advice about envy, for example, she places the bulk of this advice in the

section of her work dealing with women of the court, because:

> Et pour tant que a la court des princes et des princepces les honneurs et les estas
> mondains sont distribuéz plus generaument que autre part, disons nous – et il est
> vray – que la regne principaument envie, pour ce que chascun qui y frequente
> vouldroit avoir de yceulx biens et honneurs la plus grand part.[154]

> ["Although at the court of princes and princesses honours and worldly ranks are
> distributed more widely than elsewhere, we say (and it is true) that that is the very
> place where envy principally reigns, because each person who frequents the court
> would wish to have the greatest part of those goods and honours."][155]

Because she understands that the circumstances in which court ladies live make them more

likely to experience envy, she pays more attention to that vice than others when speaking

to them. Similarly, when shaping her advice for serving-women, she focuses, initially, on

how they can balance their religious duties with the work they have to do, because:

> . . . en pluseurs lieux la necessité de gaigner leur vie – a assez en est il parce que elles
> ont esté mises bien joennes a servir l'occuppacion du service mondain –, leur a par
> aventure empechié de savoir si largement des choses qui apertiennent au
> sauvement comme autres font, et aussi a servir Dieu en oiant messes, sermons et
> disant paternostres et oroisons, dont puet estre poise a aucunes bonnes, mais
> besoing de servir ne leur sueffre, nous semble bon parler un petit de la maniere en
> fait, oeuvre et pensee qui pour sauvement a tenir leur est | proufitable, et aussi de ce
> que elles doivent eschiver.[156]

> [. . . in many places the necessity for them to make a living—for which reason many
> of them are placed in the occupation of worldly service when they are very young—
> may perhaps have hindered them from learning the things that pertain to salvation
> as completely as others have, as well as how to serve God by hearing masses and
> sermons and saying paternosters and prayers, which can be of value to certain good
> women, but the demands of service will not allow them. And so it seems good to us

---

rather to kinds of life and to fortune.) Lorcin, 204. See also: Wisman, "Aspects socio-économiques,"
35.

[154] *Trois vertus*, 2.4 p. 135.

[155] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 97.

[156] *Trois vertus*, 3.9 p. 207.

to speak a little about the kinds of action, work, and thought that it would be profitable for them to learn for their salvation, as well as what they must avoid.]

Her decision to prioritize religious instruction before dealing with the specifics of good conduct thus stems from her knowledge of the upbringing servants are likely to have had, as well as the demands that their jobs place on their time. And her knowledge of these demands leads her to give advice on how women in service can both make time for religious activities and forgive themselves if they do not have enough. In offering guidance to her readers, then, she takes care to ground her lessons in the concrete realities of their lives, as they are shaped by their social class.[157]

This concern with specificity also shows up in her concessions to a kind of intersectionality in women's identities, as she considers how the privileges and disadvantages of certain categories stack with those of others. This can be seen in the advice that she gives to widows in the third section of her work. As she addresses this disadvantaged group, of which she herself is a member, she takes care to differentiate the advice she gives to widows who are young and old, as well as those who are rich and poor. Thus she says:

> Chieres amies, nous, meues par pitié de vous cheues en l'estat de veuveté par Mort, qui despoillees vous a de voz mariz, qui qu'ilz fussent, ouquel estat sont livréz communement maintes angoisses et moult d'anuyeulx affaires ; | mais c'est en diverses manieres, car a celles qui sont riches d'une guise, et a celles qui mie ne sont en une autre. Si est livré meschief aux riches parce que on bee communement a leur oster, et aux povres ou a celles qui ne sont mie riches, parce que en leurs affaires ne

---

[157] See Lorcin's comment, based on the realism with which Christine de Pizan renders women's lives in her work, that: "Christine ne perd jamais de vue l'intention annoncé dans le préambule du *Livre des Trois Vertus*: offrir aux femmes de toutes conditions une règle de vie qui n'ait rien d'utopique, des conceils toujours applicables" [Christine never loses sight of the intention announced in the preamble of the *Book of the Three Virtues*: to offer to women of all conditions a rule for living that is not at all utopian, counsels that are always applicable]. Lorcin, "Christine de Pizan analyste de la société," 203.

treuvent pitié si comme en nullui.[158]

["Dear friends, you move us to pity for your fall into the state of widowhood by the death that deprives you of your husbands, whoever they were. This pitiful state usually involves much anguish and much troublesome business. But it happens in different ways—to those women who are rich in one way and to those who are not at all rich in another. Rich women often have trouble because people try to relieve them of their wealth. Trouble comes to the poor or to those who are not rich, because in their affairs they do not find pity from anyone"][159]

Recognizing the ways different identity categories influence people's perceptions of women, and thus the struggles they may face, she shapes her advice accordingly. And even though much of the subsequent advice she gives is addressed to all widows, and could, as she says, apply equally to both groups, she nonetheless makes sure to include advice on both how to protect one's money and how to cope with the callousness of others.

Thus, Christine de Pizan take scrupulous care to understand how her readers' thoughts, feelings, habits, and needs are shaped by their contexts. And she uses this understanding to provide them with models, grounded in these realistic contingencies, in which they might see themselves, and from which they may learn. Indeed, in a number of chapters, de Pizan works to cultivate self-recognition in her readers by presenting them, much as the Love and Fear of Our Lord does the princess, with images of their habitual thoughts, feelings, actions, and environments. Through these images, she offers her readers chances, even if they cannot identify with the princess, to experience a form of the same kind of shock, recognition, and prudent decision-making that she engages in.

The advice that she directs to the prostitutes in her hypothetical audience, for example, is structured and worded very similarly to the admonitions of the Love and Fear

---

[158] *Trois vertus*, 3.4, p. 188.

[159] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 140.

of Our Lord.[160] Much as the princess's divine interlocutor begins by telling her: "avoyes

oublié la cognoiscence de toy meismes! Ne sces tu que tu es une miserable creature" [you

have forgotten your understanding of yourself! Don't you know that you are a wretched

creature?], the Three Virtues address the prostitutes by saying: "Ouvrez les yeux de

cognoiscence, entre vous, miserables femmes" [Open the eyes of understanding among

yourselves, wretched women].[161] In both cases, the speakers seek to make their listeners

understand themselves and comprehend their own wretchedness. And in both cases, they

do this by chastising their listeners for their sins and by painting a picture of their lives in

which they may recognize how flawed they are.[162] Thus, de Pizan reminds prostitutes of

the harsh conditions they live in and the social ostracism their profession brings them:

> Avisez la grant ordure de vostre maniere de vivre tant abhominable que avec ce que
> vous estes en l'ire de Dieu, le monde tant vous deprise que toute personne honneste
> vous fuit comme chose escommeniee, et en rue destourne sa vue que ne | vous voye.
> Et pour quoy dure en vous tant aveugle couraige que ou palu de telle abhominacion
> vous tenez plungees? Comment puet estre ramené a tel vilté femme, qui de sa nature
> et condicion est honneste, simple, et honteuse, qu'elle puist endurer tant de
> deshonnesteté: vivre, boire, et mengier entre hommes plus vilz que pourceaulx—ne
> d'autre gent n'aves cognoiscence—qui vous batent, trainent, et menacent, et
> desquelz tous les jours vous voiez en peril d'estre occises? Helas! pour quoy est
> simplece et honnestete de femme ramenee en vous a si faicte paillardise?[163]

---

[160] As Lorcin notes, this address was, to a certain degree aspirational, as de Pizan was aware that it was unlikely for prostitutes to read her work. Sarah Lawson, trans., *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*, Revised Edition, by Christine de Pizan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 167. She still strove, however, to reach out to them.

[161] *Trois vertus*, 1.4 p. 14, 3.10 p. 211.

[162] The wording they use to condemn these sins is similar as well. The Love and Fear of Our Lord refers to the princess as a "dolente creature encline a pechié et a tout vice" [miserable creature inclined to sin and to all vice], and the Three Virtues refer to the prostitutes as "miserables femmes donnees a pechié tant deshonnestement" [wretched women so dishonestly given to sin]. *Trois vertus*, 1.4, p. 13; 3.10, p. 211. As Charity Cannon Willard puts it, Christine de Pizan "is no more indulgent to the lazy queen than to the prostitute." Willard, "Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*: Feminine Ideal or Practical Advice?," 103.

[163] *Trois vertus*, 3.10, p. 212.

[See the great filth of your way of life—so abominable that because of it, you evoke God's wrath, and the world so disdains you that every honest person flees you like an excommunicated thing, and in the street they turn their heads so they do not see you. And why does such a blinded conscience remain in you that you stay sunken in the swamp of such abomination? How can a woman be brought to such vileness who is by nature and condition honest, simple, and modest? How can she endure so much immorality: to live, drink, and eat among men more vile than pigs—and to have no knowledge of any others—men who beat you, drag you around, and threaten you, and by whom, every day, you see yourself in danger of being killed? Alas! Why is the simplicity and honesty of woman brought in you to such a state of debauchery?]

Her words are harsh, much like the words of the Love and Fear of Our Lord, and the intent of these harsh words is much the same. Using her knowledge of the conditions that prostitutes endure, her goal is to show them, as the Love and Fear of Our Lord shows the princess, an image in which they can see themselves reflected, one that will teach them the horror of their situations, and thus inspire in them a desire to change.[164]

De Pizan also works to grant these disadvantaged readers opportunities for recognition by virtue of her efforts to understand why they might be reluctant to abandon their way of life. Considering what it is about their environments that might hold them back, she presents a series of hypothetical objections that the prostitutes in her audience might have to the lessons she has to teach them:

Et se aucune de vous se vouloit excuser, disant que ce feroit elle voulentiers, mais ·iii· raisons l'en destornent: l'une, pour ce que les deshonnestes hommes qui la hantent ne lui souffriroient; l'autre, que le monde, qui l'a en abhominacion, la debouteroit et chaceroit de tous lez, et pour ce, puisqu'elle est tant ahontee, jamais ne s'oseroit veoir entre gens; la tierce, que elle ne saroit de quoy vivre, car elle ne scet nul mestier, -- si disons que ces raisons rient ne valent, car remede puet avoir

---

[164] One could remark that Christine de Pizan is certainly underestimating both her interlocutors' awareness of the problems with their lives and the strength of the factors that keep them performing sex work. That being said, I take at face value her efforts to understand, and, through identification, to help these women in her audience, even if her understanding is inevitably limited by her own experiences and biases.

en toutes[165]

> [And if any of you might like to excuse yourselves, saying that she would do it willingly, but three reasons deter her: the first, because the dishonest men who frequent her would not allow it; second, that the world, which holds her in abomination, would reject her and chase her away from every place, and for this reason, because she is so ashamed, she would never dare to be seen among people; the third, that she would not know how to live, because she knows no profession— then we say that these reasons are worth nothing, because there are remedies for all of them].[166]

In outlining these objections, she strives, as she does with the princess, to guess at the ways her audience members think. And in attempting to put these thoughts into words, she seeks to enable them to recognize themselves in the images she provides.

Having striven to comprehend the barriers that keep prostitutes from changing their ways, and hopefully invoked their identification, she proceeds to address these obstacles one by one, describing the actions that her listeners might perform in order to move beyond them. Through these descriptions, she paints them pictures of the shapes that self-improvement might take, much as she does when she describes how the princess applies the lessons of prudence.[167] Thus, she encourages them to visualize ways in which they might take prudent action in their own contexts. Indeed, by situating this advice in the context of a rational response to the specific obstacles that prostitutes might dread (cruel men, social rejection, poverty) and accompanying it with an explanation of the specific

---

[165] *Trois vertus*, 3.10 p. 213.

[166] I have preserved de Pizan's abrupt switch between the second and third person in my translation.

[167] As Rosalind Brown-Grant observes, Christine de Pizan treats all of her female readers as rational individuals: " Indeed, even when addressing prostitutes, the most reviled of all social groups, she uses a set of simplified but reasoned arguments by which to convince such women that their spiritual interests would be best served by abandoning their immoral lifestyle." Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence*, 188.

resources that are available to them (God, the church, local magistrates, compassionate neighbors) she makes it clear that what she is asking them to do is use their prudent circumspection to consider, before talking virtuous action, "quel puissance on a de ce faire; la iiᵉ, quel ayde et comment bon on y pourra avoir; tiercement, quelz pourront estre les contredis, repunances et empeschemens, et y faire les doubtes qui y conviennent; et quartement, a quel n la chose pourroit venir." ["what power one has to achieve it; second, what manner of help, and of what quality, one will be able to get for it; third, what objections, resistances, and impediments might exist to raise doubts concerning it; and fourth, what might be the final outcome."].[168] As with the princess, she uses identification as a means to model the lessons of prudence.

The guidance Christine de Pizan provides to an envious lady of the court likewise begins with an effort to evoke recognition that parallels the tactics she takes with regard to the figure of the Princess. When introducing the Princess, as mentioned above, Christine de Pizan provides a window into the woman's internal dialogue. The goal is for readers who habitually speak to themselves as the princess does to recognize their own thoughts in hers, and thus be drawn to follow her in her quest of self-improvement. Similarly, when introducing the envious Lady of the court, Christine de Pizan narrates how the Lady will speak to herself, shifting seamlessly in the middle of the dialogue from the second-person voice of envy to the first-person thoughts of the Lady, to show how this sin is affecting her. As she relates:

> . . . nonobstant que les | aguillons et pointures en courage de celle fausse envie soient en tel cas telz : Et pour quoy puet en ce estre que ma dame a plus en grace ceste cy ou ceste la que toy, et plus la veult et appelle en ses secrez et environ soy?

---

[168] de Pizan, *Le Livre de paix*, 1.5 p. 210; Green et al., trans., *The Book of Peace*, 1.5 p. 70.

N'es tu de son lignage ou plus noble que celle n'est, si en fust mieulx paree ? . . . Et ja est plus avancie en ce pou de temps qu'elle y a demouré que toy qui y es des ton enface. Pour quoy puet ce estre, quelque cause y a? Mais je mettray barres se je puis et la desavanceray: je sçay bien comment. Tels choses et telles sçay sur elle | — et se je ne le sçay, si le controuveray je avant . . .[169]

["However, in such a case the darts and stings in her heart from this foul envy may lead her to say to herself, 'How is it possible that my lady holds this or that person in more favor than you? How can she want her around more and let her in on her secrets more? Aren't you of her lineage or more noble than this person is; how can she be better suited to it? . . . She is already more advanced in this short time that she has lived here than you who have been here from childhood! How can this be? There is some reason for it, but I will put obstacles in her way if I can and take her down a peg or two! I know quite well how to do it. I know certain things about her. And if I don't know them I will make them up or I will embroider them!"][170]

Here is made visible, as with the Princess, the way that a woman speaks in the privacy of her mind, and how her negative patterns of thought lead her into sin. Following this we see, as with the princess, how the envious Lady manages to take charge of her own rational faculties and save herself. While this additional voice in the Lady's head is not specified to be that of Prudence or the Love and Fear of Our Lord, in its second-person admonitions to her it serves the same role. As de Pizan relates:

Telz ou semblables sont les amonnestements d'Envie, mais tantost par bon avis et justs conscience les boutera arriere la sage dame ou damoiselle de court, qui se revendra a soy en pensant : Ha! fole musarde ! et de quoy t'es tu avisee? Mais, pour Dieu, de quoy te chault il de toutes telz fanfelus ? Se tu fais le mieulx que tu pueux et le plus loyaument en toutes choses, et tu n'en as si grant guerdon en ce monde comme un au- | tre, Dieu, qui seul est juste et vray h=juge, qui cognoist tous courages et a qui riens ne puet estre cellé, le scet bien : si le te rendra, et n'y fauldra point.[171]

["Such or similar are the goads of envy. But soon by good counsel and a just conscience the wise lady or maiden of the court will reject them. She will be her old

---

[169] *Trois vertus*, 2.5, p. 136.

[170] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 98-99.

[171] *Trois vertus*, 2.5, p. 137.

self again, saying, 'O foolish dreamer, what can you be thinking of? What do you care about all these treacherous things? What does it matter if you do what you can loyally in all things and you don't have such great rewards for it in this world as somebody else? God, who alone is a just, true judge and who knows all hearts and from whom nothing can be hidden, knows very well what you have done. He will not fail to repay you for it."][172]

In offering this dialogue, Christine de Pizan offers to readers who see themselves in the envious lady a script they can follow in speaking to themselves, a guide to strategies for calming the voices in their heads. And in this secondary portion of the dialogue, Christine de Pizan gives her readers additional opportunities for identification, as well as for introspection. For the Lady of the court does not just chastise herself. Rather, she tells herself:

> . . . puet avenir que toy meismes ne cognois pas tes propres deffaulz par ce que tu t'es trop favorable, et ta dame les cognoist bien . . . se tu veulz bien regarder au vray de ton conscience et lire en tes fais, tu trouveras peut estre | que tu le pueux bien avopir desservi pour tel chose et telle que tu feis, et telz paroles que tu deis qui lui furent rapportees, dont elle se courrouça, qui ne fut bien fait ne dit a toy, et elle t'en aime moins . . . trop aise estoies, et trop orgueilleuse, et te sembloit que riens ne te pouoit nuire . . .[173]

> ["it may be that you yourself do not know your own faults because you are too lenient with yourself, and your lady knows them well . . . If you pay close attention to the truth of your conscience and review your actions, you will perhaps find that you may well have deserved it for something that you said or did that was reported to her and angered her, something that you should not have done or said, and she does not love you the better for it . . . perhaps you are too complacent and too proud, and you assumed that nothing could harm you."][174]

In the voice of the lady examining herself, Christine de Pizan gives details which her readers might perceive elements of their own conduct—elements of their own buried pride, their own guilt, their own complacency. If they do recognize these things in

---

[172] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 99.

[173] *Trois vertus*, 2.5, p. 138.

[174] Lawson, trans., *Treasure*, 100.

themselves, the formerly envious lady's inner voice gives them a means to address these failings: by considering, as the prideful princess does, what their faults are and listening to the better angels of their nature in seeking a better solution.

By incorporating these details of her readers' lives into her work, then, Christine de Pizan encourages them to identify with them. And even though she does not provide the same kinds of conversion-narratives for every woman as she does for the princess and the lady, she nonetheless fills her work with images of how women think, feel, and act in different contexts and in response to the different scenarios of their lives. And the exhaustive detail with which she renders the lives of these women allows her to create a remarkably full series of pictures of the world around them and how they interact with it— pictures that provide opportunities for identification.[175]

Thus she describes how, because baronesses' husbands are often absent, a baroness ought to understand not only the general principles of feminine conduct but also the management of her estate, the laws and customs that govern the land, the use of weapons, and how to command the attack or defense of a fortress, should the need arise.[176] She describes how a princess's chaperone should respond if her charge is having an affair, with examples of how her approach should change depending on her relationship to the princess, how far the matter has gone, whether or not people have begun to gossip, and even whether the suitor is handsome or ugly.[177] She describes how a young woman who

---

[175] See, for example, Lorcin's remark that that Christine de Pizan's advice for the wives of laborers, by virtue of its realistic and grounded detail, constitutes "une immersion dans le quotidien" [an immersion in the quotidian]. Lorcin, "Christine de Pizan analyste de la société," 203.

[176] *Trois vertus*, 2.9.

[177] *Trois vertus*, 1.25-1.26.

lives on a manor ought to understand law, finance, and every operation of the manor, and

goes on to describe how such a woman will dress herself, manage her workers, and oversee

the crops and the animals on the farm, giving detailed seasonal advice regarding what

kinds of things the lady needs to know to keep her whole household running.[178] And she

gives servant-women advice on how they should take into account their health, schedules,

and duties when deciding how often to go to church and how often they should pray.[179]

What she offers to her readers, through these models, is a rich variety of details in

which they may recognize their own circumstances. And as with her description of the

princess's good conduct, undertaken in response to the teachings of prudence, these

models offer readers opportunities to see how these hypothetical women respond, or

ought to respond, to their own contexts in making prudent decisions. For readers are not

told that a baroness should act the same in every circumstance. Rather, they see how a

baroness ought to conduct herself in times of peace, in preparation for the different actions

she must take in times of war. Likewise, they are not told that a chaperone should always

follow the same script in responding to a princess's imprudence. Instead, they see how a

chaperone will respond differently to different social cues, shaping her responses to her

own needs and that of the princess she guards. They see how the lady of the manor will

adjust her activities to the seasons. They see how a prudent serving-woman will consider

her environment in deciding what shape her piety should take. And they see how woman

after woman, example after example, regardless of class, will act differently depending on

her nature, her environment, and her needs. In identifying with these models, readers are

---

[178] *Trois vertus*, 2.10.

[179] *Trois vertus*, 3.9.

invited to experience what it feels like to exercise prudence in a context similar to their own. And because these images of women are so profoundly situated, their actions necessarily influenced by everything around them, they serve as object lessons in the kind of circumspection—and introspection—necessary to taking moral action in one's own context.

It is this variety of prudence that is the ultimate message of the work. And identification, in all of its various forms, is the means through which Christine de Pizan teaches it. Recognizing elements of their own identities and contexts in the models provided for them, readers enter into the text, experiencing, along with its characters, what prudent actions feel like.[180] With every moment of identification, readers pick up another piece that pertains to them, another experience they can add to their mental stores. And although the specific experiences may vary, in accordance with the readers, their identities, and their needs, the overarching lesson is the same. What makes these characters wise, or good, or prudent, is how they act in response to who and where they are, in every moment of every day. And it is by considering the texts and contexts in which they find *themselves*, that readers may take action that is prudent, moral, and, ultimately, right for them.[181]

---

[180] See Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 169.

[181] See Carr 205-211.

Chapter 3

Making Meaning: Fragmentary Identification and Composite Learning in the *Chemin de lonc estude*

In the previous chapters, I discussed how identification could function as a profound aid to learning. By catching readers' attention and allowing them to viscerally perceive the applicability of various texts to their own lives, it enables them to derive personalized insights from the works they read, opening ways into the Field of Letters. When it works well, it is a vital teaching tool. As mentioned above, however, there are many factors that can limit its efficacy, some of which are inherent to identification itself. Indeed, even as she presents the benefits of identification, de Pizan also acknowledges some of its fundamental limitations. In this chapter, I explore how de Pizan works to recast some of these limitations as opportunities for her readers.

Previously, I examined a pivotal scene in the introduction of the *Chemin de lonc estude*, where Christine's identification with Boethius teaches her a profound lesson. Here, I will be analyzing the sequel to this scene: the journey Christine embarks on when the lessons of a single text are not enough. My primary argument in this chapter is that de Pizan, in depicting her narrator's journey along a path made of books, under the guidance of an allegorized figure of textual learning who is herself a literary composite, offers her readers a mode of reading that will enable them to turn partial insights derived from single texts into a rich body of composite knowledge that they may use for personal guidance.

I will begin by discussing the limitations of identification that this model of reading is meant to rectify—limitations that hinge on the necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, and

166

contingent quality of the experience of identification. This fragmentary quality can be seen

in the Introduction to Part 3 of the *Livre des trois vertus*, where de Pizan discusses the

purpose of her work:

> . . . c'est nostre entente que tout ce que recordé avons aux aultres dames, tant es
> vertus comme ou gouvernement de vivre, en ce qui puet a chascune femme
> apertenir, de quelque estat que elle soit, soit aussi bien dit pour les unes que pour
> les aultres, si en puet chascune prendre telle piece qu'elle voit qui lui apertient.[1]

> [It is our intention that everything that we have recorded about other ladies, with
> regard to virtues as well as the government of one's life, can pertain to each woman,
> of whatever estate that she is. It is just as well said for one as for another, in that
> each can take that piece which she sees as pertaining to her.]

Here, de Pizan expresses her hope that her work will have something to say to every

woman, but she also acknowledges that each woman might find only *pieces* of the work to

be relevant to her own life. In order to make her work broadly accessible, she is thus

compelled to include a staggering number of examples to encourage readerly identification.

The sheer diversity of individual experiences, however, is liable to work against her most

fervent efforts. She can guess at what will resonate with her readers, extrapolating from

her own experiences and what she knows of the experience of others. Ultimately, however,

there is no guarantee that a reader will see herself in all of, or even part of, an individual

text. Rather, what is available to readers, in the majority of cases, is a series of fleeting

moments of identification with portions of a text in which they can see themselves,

interspersed with stretches where the book is distant from their experiences.

Even when identification does occur, the experience is likely to teach the reader

only a partial lesson. This is what happens when the prideful princess listens to The Love

and Fear of Our Lord. Recognizing herself in his description of her pride, she is able to

---

[1] *Trois vertus*, 3.1, pp. 171-72.

apply the rest of his description to herself and to learn from it. But in the immediate aftermath of this lesson, rather than understanding what she should do next, she finds herself in a state of near-panic as she recognizes her sins but does not know how to remedy them. Only when she combines the insights she gained from The Love and Fear of Our Lord with information she remembers from previous lessons and from the teachings of Worldly Prudence and Holy Information is she able to move forward and decide how she must act. One source, one interlocutor has taught her something, but the lesson is incomplete.

The fundamental contingency and incompleteness of identification can be seen most vividly in the *Chemin de long estude*, when Christine encounters Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and recognizes herself in the work's author. As mentioned in chapter one, when Christine sees herself in Boethius, it is largely a matter of chance: the work happens to resemble her at the point of her life when she picks it up.[2] From this fortuitous coincidence, she is able to experience a profound sense of identification with Boethius. But the lessons she learns from this experience are nonetheless incomplete. Upon identifying with Boethius, she is able, as mentioned above, both to derive personal comfort from his works and to apply his insights to the world around her. The Boethius-narrator of the *Consolation* struggles to see how the world may be ordered when its component parts exist in conflict and considers in detail how people suffer from the vicissitudes of Fortune and their striving after goals other than the absolute Good.[3] After reading the *Consolation*, Christine likewise

---

[2] See Miranda Griffin's analysis of the ways that Christine de Pizan, through her encounter with Boethius's work, highlights the role that chance plays in any encounter with, and reading of, a text. Miranda Griffin, "Transforming Fortune: Reading and Chance in Christine de Pizan's 'Mutacion de Fortune' and 'Chemin de Long Estude,'" *The Modern Language Review* 104, no. 1 (2009): 57, 61–62, https://doi.org/10.2307/20468123.

[3] Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 3, prose 12, p. 66; bk. 3, *passim*.

begins to consider not simply her own sorrows, but the sorrows and uncertainty of the entire world, reflecting on how people are full of corruption how war and conflict are constant, not just among every group of humans but among all kinds of animals and even among the elements themselves.[4] By the end of the *Consolation*, the narrator has learned the nature of the Good, the unreliability of Fortune, the existence of an order to the universe, and how to cultivate acceptance of the fact that there is little in his life he can truly control. Christine initially tries to apply a similar form of Boethian consolation to her political concerns, reassuring herself that God's intentions are good and that by striving to live well and reject the world, one can work towards paradise.[5] It is a more Christian-inflected form of stoicism than Boethius's, but one rooted in a similar acceptance of suffering and aspiration towards God and the Good.

While the *Consolation* makes it clear that accepting Fortune and striving towards the good are the keys to deriving consolation from Philosophy, however, Christine does not seem quite as willing as Boethius to accept that the world is doomed to conflict and there is nothing that she can do to fix it. She is able to fall asleep after concluding, in imitation of Boethius, that the best one can do is to strive for the good and for closeness to God. But the vast majority of her subsequent dream casts her as a witness to a cosmic debate in which various celestial beings argue over how to save the world and eventually decide to entrust Christine with helping them find the solution.

As is apparent from her continued rumination on the problems of the world, the

---

[4] *Chemin*, 315-436.

[5] *Chemin*, 437-450. As Griffin observes, "the fictional personae of Boethius and Christine both find solace in the deeper understanding of the true good that their misfortunes have brought them." Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 58.

consolation Christine derives from her reading is only partial. As Andrea Tarnowski notes,

> Although the *Consolation of Philosophy* serves as a remedy to Christine's intial
> suffering, and introduces the spirit of curiosity in which she will pursue her quest,
> the antidote to larger social conflicts remains to be discovered. Personal progress is
> easier to define and realize than the improvement of society at large. But it is
> precisely the question of social progress that occupies the center of the *Chemin*; this
> is the problem the poem as a whole seeks to resolve.[6]

On one level, this could be read as an example of incomplete identification: Christine has

not internalized the full message of the work because she cannot completely identify with

Boethius. Accepting her powerlessness to change the world, however, would be profoundly

inconsistent with her personal identity.

Christine is, after all, a figure for Christine de Pizan, and Christine de Pizan was

deeply, passionately concerned with politics, government, and using her writing to

intervene in them. Writing as she was in the midst of the Hundred Years' War, in a country

rocked by the madness of its king and the rumblings of civil discord, with patrons who

---

[6] Andrea Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 189. Allyson Carr likewise observes that de Pizan's "*personal* troubles have been comforted by reading Boethius' text, but laying in bed she is assailed suddenly by the troubles of the world at large. The comfort of Philosophy has not answered those complaints: rather, (in good philosophical fashion), it appears to have helped raise them." Allyson Carr, *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change*, PDF (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 141. See also Tarnowski's argument: "Nous nous rappelons que *Le chemin de long estude* s'ouvre sur la tristesse de Christine devant les conflits qui bouleversent le monde. Il faut trouver quelqu'un qui soit susceptible de restaurer l'ordre. C'est donc un problème politique qui motive le texte." [We recall that *Le chemin de long estude* opens on Christine's sorrow in the face of the conflicts that are shaking the world. It is necessary to find one who is able to restore order. It is therefore a political problem that motivates the text]. Andrea Tarnowski, "Pallas Athena, la science, et la chevalerie," in *Sur le chemin de longue étude… actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, ed. Bernard. Ribémont, Études Christiniennes 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 155. And the solution to this problem is, as Bernard Ribémont, argues, not simply personal but public consolation: "si Christine cherche, à la manière du philosophe, consolation à ses malheurs, elle le fait en proposant une consolation/remède pour ceux de la France." [If Christine seeks, in the manner of the philosopher, consolation for her misfortunes, she does so by proposing a consolation/remedy for those of France]. Bernard Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan : entre espace scientifique et espace imaginé (*Le Livre du Chemin de long estude*)," in *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. Liliane. Dulac and Bernard. Ribémont, Medievalia "Études christiniennes" 16 (Orléans: Paradigme, 1995), 250.

were key players in these ongoing conflicts, de Pizan dedicated a significant portion of her

corpus to educating and counseling the powers that be in political philosophy, the nature of

good leadership, and their duties to their people.[7] She also, at times, directly advocated for

political actions on the part of the monarchy, such as in her epistle to Isabelle of Bavaria, in

which she exhorted her to intervene in a conflict between the dukes of Orléans and

Burgundy.[8] Her desire to change the world for the better, to find a solution to its endless

wars, was not something she could simply let go.[9]

---

[7] Long ignored or dismissed as derivative, Christine de Pizan's political theory has received increased scholarly attention in recent years. For an overview of recent scholarship on this topic, see: Tracy Adams, "Christine de Pizan," *French Studies* 71, no. 3 (2017): 395–97, https://academic.oup.com/fs/article/71/3/388/3859856. For an early defense of Christine de Pizan as a political thinker, see: Claude Gauvard, "Christine de Pisan a-t-elle eu une pensée politique ? A propos d'ouvrages récents," *Revue Historique* 250, no. 2 (508) (1973): 417–30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40952022. For a study of Christine de Pizan's political writings that engages topics such as the relationship between these writings and her self-representation throughout her works, see: Claire Le Ninan, *Le Sage Roi et la clergesse : L'Écriture du politique dans l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013). For an overview of how Christine de Pizan responded in her writing to contemporary political events, as well as sought to intervene in them, see: Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Christine de Pizan and the Political Life in Late Medieval France," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9–24. See also: Kate Langdon Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015054447688; Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, eds., *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, Disputatio 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325; and Claude Gauvard, "Christine de Pizan et ses contemporains : l'engagement politique des écrivains dans le royaume de France aux XIVe et XVe siècles," in *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. Liliane Dulac and Bernard Ribémont, Medievalia "Études christiniennes" (Orléans: Paradigme, 1995), 105–28.

[8] See: Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Christine de Pizan and the Political Life in Late Medieval France," 17–18; Samuel McCormick, "Mirrors for the Queen: A Letter from Christine de Pizan on the Eve of Civil War," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 273–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630802210344.

[9] As Maria Merkel puts it: "Fra queste lotte di parte, in questo stato di profondo decadimento, ecco sorgere la debole voce di Cristina invocante la pace: « petite clochette qui sonne grant voix ». A questa nobile missione de pacificatrice o di moralista elle dedicherà tutti i suoi scritti fino all'ultima sua ora di vita" [Amidst these partisan struggles, in this state of profound decay, Christine's faint voice arises, invoking peace: "a little bell with a loud voice." To this noble mission of peacemaker or

In this disjunction between Boethius and Christine, both the strengths and limitations of identification become visible. Reading can give Christine ideas, feelings, knowledge, and new perspectives, but it cannot make her into a different person: the limits of identification are the identity of the reader at that moment in time. This necessary incompleteness and imperfection of any reading experience can be restrictive to readers, but it also suggests that when readers attend to the parts of a text in which they can see themselves and pull back from those they do not, they can filter that which is relevant to their own lives and which is capable of helping them from that which is not. By focusing on the parts of the text with which one can identify, one receives knowledge that is relevant to the self—that allows one to work through one's own problems and follow one's own desires.

This knowledge cannot come from a single text, however. Boethius alone cannot answer the questions that Boethius raises. As a man writing near the end of his life, imprisoned and condemned. fallen in the esteem of the powerful, and with little hope left of changing the world, Boethius's focus is on what he can do to come to peace with his fate. As a woman writing from the middle of her life, with connections among the powerful, a family to support, and a passionate desire to do what she can to better her own life and the lives of others, Christine cannot find the answers she seeks in Boethius's writing alone.[10]

---

moralist she will dedicate all her writings up to the last hour of her life]. Maria Merkel, "Le Chemin De Long Estude: primo tentativo di imitazione dantesca in Francia," *La Rassegna Nazionale*, 2nd ser., 32 (April 1921): 192, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b2874137.

[10] Allyson Carr likewise comments on the disjunctions between Pizan and Boethius, stating: "Philosophy's consolation—unsurprisingly, given Boethius' circumstances—is aimed at the individual, not the world. He is exiled and condemned to die. His world has rejected him. Christine is not in that situation, however. She is still mired very firmly in the world and now that she has

Instead, she must combine what she has seen in Boethius that is relevant to her own life

with what she has seen of herself in other texts, collecting the knowledge that she has

access to via scattered moments of identification—knowledge that will necessarily be more

personally relevant and actionable than that which is acquired via encounters with works

with which one cannot identify at all. [11] In doing so, she will be able to generate a new

whole: a form of personalized wisdom that is constructed from the texts of others but

shaped to the self. It is this process, which I term "composite reading," that de Pizan

allegorizes in the latter portions of the Path of Long Study.

Composite Reading

In order to define what composite reading entails, I draw from *The Book of Memory*, Mary

Carruthers' detailed examination of medieval scholars' techniques and theories of reading

and memory. While Carruthers deals specifically with formal, scholarly techniques of

reading, which de Pizan does not specifically encourage her readers to practice, I find her

description of the process by which textual memories can be stored and new works

---

found comfort for her own troubles, she begins to wonder about the larger picture." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 141.

[11] The incomplete and fragmentary nature of identification can be productively understood in terms of Didier Lechat's discussion of the way that Christine de Pizan disperses her autoibiography through a series of fictions and feminine figures. As he states: "quelles soient les analogies entre Christine et certaines de cleres et nobles femmes énumérées dans *La Cité des Dames*, l'identification du *je* à un cas particulier n'est jamais totale. Tel est aussi le sens que prend la fragmentation : la Vérité de Christine, dispersée entre les veuves héroïques, les clergeces et les prophétesses, se trouve un peu partot, mais elle n'est nulle part restituée complètement." [Whatever the analogies may be between Christine and certain famous and noble women enumerated in *The City of Ladies*, the identification of the *I* with a particular case is never complete. This is also the meaning of fragmentation: a little of the Truth of Christine, dispersed amongst heroic widows, female clerks and prophetesses, can be found everywhere, but it is never completely reassembled.] Didier Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction » : Métamorphoses Du* Je *Chez Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, et Christine de Pizan*, Études Christiniennes 7 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2005), 456–57. What one perceives when one identifies is always a fragment of the self, never oneself entire.

constructed from them useful in describing the less structured, more personal and

contingent process that de Pizan sees her readers as participating in. As Carruthers argues,

according to prevalent scholarly conceptions of reading in the Middle Ages, when a reader

deliberately undertakes to memorize a text, she must necessarily break it up into pieces, in

order to perform the mnemonic process called *divisio*.[12] Reading can thus be understood, in

a way, as fundamentally fragmentary. Every text, as it is read, is broken up by the memory,

and every act of recalling a text involves calling up these memorial fragments.[13]

Key to the process of utilizing these fragments is the process of *meditatio*, whereby a

reader, remembering and reflecting on the text, in essence takes the text into her body:

shaping it to herself and being shaped by it as the text is incorporated into and modified

her memory.[14] As a result of this process, the author's wisdom becomes the reader's

experience, and this remembered experience becomes material for the reader's future

ethical activity.[15] The more works the reader reads and meditates on, the more fragments

she accumulates in her memory, with the consequence that the mind becomes a kind of

florilegium, a compilation of textual excerpts for use as an aid to memory and

---

[12] Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 174.

[13] Due to her focus on mnemonic techniques and theories, Carruthers is inclined to treat this process of memorial fragmentation and recall less as an automatic one and more as the result of the cultivation of memorial strategies and techniques. Carruthers, 163–64, 174. I see this process as functioning in a way that is a bit less deliberate and more contingent, as portions of the text are naturally rendered more salient, and thus more memorable by virtue of the responses one has to them—in addition of course, to being more worthy of being deliberately remembered.

[14] Carruthers, 164–68.

[15] Carruthers, 164, 168, 179–80.

composition.[16] When readers meditate and memorize, their textual florilegia become material both for the composition of written texts and the composition of ethical decisions in the present, as well as, in some ways, the composition of the self.[17]

One can see how identification, as both a means of learning and as a constraint on that learning, can be understood as interacting with this process of reading and memory, whether undertaken via the application of scholarly exegetical strategies or informally, as the reader engages with the text on her own idiosyncratic terms. As an affective experience, identification renders the fragments of the text with which one identifies as particularly memorable, and thus particularly available for use in mental composition.[18] As an experience which underlines the connections between the text and the reader's life, identification aids the reader in shaping the fragments of the text to herself, both in the moment of reading and afterwards, in the process of reflecting on her reading. And as an experience that points to the portions of the text that are most relevant to the reader, it helps the reader to identify what in the text would be most helpful for her to use. The remembered fragments generated as the result of identification thus function as a particularly privileged variety of memory in terms of their ethical and practical utility.

By deliberately recalling and combining these privileged memory-fragments of identification, one can, as Christine de Pizan demonstrates in the *Chemin*, construct composite lessons—forms of wisdom that do not simply restate what has come before but shape and synthesize it into something new. Searching one's memory, allegorized in the

---

[16] Carruthers, 174–76.

[17] Carruthers, 85, 164, 179–80.

[18] On the idea of forming emotional associations as a helpful mnemonic strategy, and on the necessarily emotional nature of memory, see: Carruthers, 59–60, 169, 174.

Chemin as both a mental space and the objects and people that inhabit it, one can locate the

portions of texts with which one has identified and combine their insights to craft lessons

that are derived not from a single text, but from every relevant text in which one has seen

oneself. [19] By creating these mental compilations, the reader acts, in some ways, like a

writer: making her own miniature "texts" from the excerpts of other authors' writing in

their memory. [20] Indeed, as Carruthers discusses, much as writers build texts from

remembered fragments, "learning itself" can be understood as "a process of composition,

collation and recollection" as one brings together and builds upon one's memories in order

to make "new" knowledge.[21] And because of the fragmentary nature of identification, this

kind of mental compilation is largely necessary if one is to learn from the works one

[19] As Sarah Kay notes, despite the cosmic scope of the *Chemin*, "it is strongly implied that Christine's travels take place inside her own head." Sarah Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre Du Chemin de Long Estude*," in *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 157. Indeed, the image of the Path of Long Study in some ways reflects a kind of medieval mnemonic strategy, the creation of mental pictures or memory "places," whereby in order to remember a text, a reader would organize "memorial cues by means of a composite scene of mental images associated with various key-words and subjects." Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 87; Mary J. Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Introduction to *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*," ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 6–8. By exploring this mental composition site, one can recover the remembered materials one needs to create new compositions, drawing them "from the networks of your experiences, including of course all of your experiences of books, music, and other arts." Carruthers and Ziolkowski, 6.

[20] As Carruthers and Ziolkowski argue, "Re-collection was essentially a task of composition, literally bringing together matters found in the various places where they are stored to be reassembled in a new place." Carruthers and Ziolkowski, "Introduction to *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*," 1. Thinking, then, can also be understood as a form of composition, in the sense that "It necessarily uses memory because it combines imagines from memory's store. One should therefore think of a single *cogitatio* or 'thought' as a small-scale composition, a bringing together (*con + pono*) of various bits (*phantasmata*) in one's inventory." Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 33–34.

[21] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 194–95, 199. On the nature of scholarly knowledge as composite in the *Chemin*, see: Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan : entre espace scientifique et espace imaginé (*Le Livre du Chemin de long estude*)," 253.

reads.[22]

The idea that compilation can be creative is attested in both Carruthers' writings on memory and in the writings of Christine de Pizan herself. In her discussion of *divisio*, Carruthers relates how mnemonic strategies were intended to allow one to break a text into parts and then reassemble them in the correct order through *compositio* (the arrangement of the text in the memory), retaining the original connections between ideas.[23] Because these parts are remembered as fragments, however, they are also subject to being "filed" and "cross-filed" in memory with different associations and connections.[24] As a result, it becomes possible to think of them:

> . . . in several different settings, leading to the process of 'composition' in the modern English sense. It is no wonder that early writers considered building metaphors to be so apt for reading and composing, for each memorized 'bit' is like a plank or brick one 'places' in a design," both in the building of memories and in the building of texts, which begins in the memory.[25]

Building an edifice of memory in the mind necessarily involves a rearrangement and personalization of the remembered material. And the same applies to both the construction of written compilations and the construction of composite lessons, as Christine de Pizan makes clear.

Indeed, the metaphor of building a new structure with the fragments of the

---

[22] For an excellent and relevant analysis of the fragmentary quality that Christine de Pizan often attributes to the knowledge she gains from reading, and the creative ways she combines these fragments into new, didactically effective forms, see: Bernard. Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme," in *Christine de Pizan: Une femme de science, une femme de lettres*, ed. Juliette Dor and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008), 78–87, 92.

[23] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 85.

[24] Carruthers, 174.

[25] Carruthers, 174, 194.

materials one reads was one that Christine de Pizan used to describe her own writing process, in which the extraction and recombination of excerpts from other sources played a large part.[26] She uses this metaphor most famously in her *Livre de la cité des dames*, for which it forms the central conceit. Building, there, becomes a symbol of the process of compilation, whereby one extracts "bricks" in the form of pieces of narrative and uses them to construct a new textual edifice. Even though one's materials for compilation are the writings of others, through the act of construction—the arrangement of fragments through the guidance of one's imagination—one is able to create something of one's own.

Indeed, in *Le livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, Christine de Pizan uses the metaphors of both building and embroidery to justify the personal and creative nature of her activity of compilation. In the introduction to this work, when addressing the idea that some might critique her for repeating other authors' words, de Pizan argues:

> . . . ilz pourroient dire: « Ceste femme-cy ne dit mie de soy ce que elle explique en son livre, ains fait son traittié par procès de ce que autres auteurs on[t] dit à la lettre » ; de laquel chose à ceulz je puis respondre que tout ainsi comme l'ovrier de architecture ou maçonnage n'a mie fait les pierres et les estoffes, dont il bastist et ediffie le chastel ou maison, qu'il tient à perfaire et où il labeure, non obstant assemble les matieres ensemble, chascune où elle doit servir, selon la fin de l'entencion où il tent, aussi les brodeurs, qui font diverses divises, selon la soubtivité de leur ymaginacion, sanz faulte ne firent mie les soyes, l'or, ne les matieres, et ainsi d'aultres ouvrages, tout ainsi vrayement n'ay je mie fait toutes les matieres, de quoy le traittié de ma compilacion est composé ; il me souffist seulement que les sache appliquer à propos, si que bien puissent servir à la fin de l'ymaginacion, à laquelle je

---

[26] Indeed, Christine de Pizan was conscious of the nature of many of her works as compilations, repeatedly referring to her writing process as one of "cueilletage" or the "picking" of flowers from the field of letters, which she would then weave into garlands, understood as her original works. Florence Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture En France Aux XIVe et XVe Siècles: Pratiques, Poétique, Imaginaire*, Bibliothèque Du XVe Siècle 74 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 138–44. For more on Christine de Pizan's role as a compilator, and the way she worked to legitimize and valorize her practices of compilation as a form of composition, see: Joël Blanchard, "Compilation et légitimation au XVe siècle," *Poétique* 19, no. 74 (1988): 139–57, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x001429133.

tends à perfaire"[27]

["They can say: 'That woman does not draw out of herself what she exposes in her book; quite to the contrary, she composes her treatise by following word for word what other authors say.' I can answer them thus: just as a worker in architecture or masonry has not made the stones and the materials with which he builds and edifies the castle or the house that he strives to complete and for which he labors, and in spite of that, he puts together the materials, each in its place according to its purpose; and just as embroiderers, who vary their designs according to the subtlety of their imagination, in no case make the silk threads, the gold, or the other materials—and so on for other sorts of work—so, in truth, I have not made all the materials of which my compilation is made. It is enough that I know how to apply them appropriately to serve my purpose" (so that they can serve well the ends of the imagination, which I strive to achieve)][28]

In this passage, Christine de Pizan likens her efforts of compilation to those of builders or

embroiderers, who, although they do not make their materials, are able to rearrange them

in new forms according to the guidance of their imagination and intentions to make

something that is more than the sum of its parts.[29] In making this comparison, de Pizan

---

[27] Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, ed. Suzanne Solente, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1936), pt. 2, chap. 21, pp. 190–191, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015012966662.

[28] The quoted translation is Lygia G. Cochrane's translation of Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet's translation of this passage into modern French. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *The Color of Melancholy: The Uses of Books in the Fourteenth Century*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 63–64, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015040579172. Cerquiglini-Toulet's and Cochrane's translations are good ones, but both compress the end of the passage a bit more than I would like, and in doing so, remove de Pizan's second mention of "imagination." Thus, I have appended my own translation of the final part of this passage in parentheses after Cochrane's translation.

[29] Christine de Pizan also frequently described her act of writing as a process of picking flowers and weaving them into garlands, an image that likewise evokes both compilation and creativity. See Bouchet, *Le Discours Sur La Lecture*, 138–44; Sarah Delale, "Matière à nouvelles lectures : l'imaginaire de la composition littéraire chez Christine de Pizan," in *Matières à débat : La notion de matiere littéraire dans la littérature médiévale*, Interférences (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017), 631–44. For a fuller analysis of Christine de Pizan's imagery of collecting fragments from her reading and artistically combining them into new forms, as it relates to her practices of composition and didactic writing, see: Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme."

articulates, as Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet puts it, a kind of "théorie de la composition

créatrice" ["theory of creative composition"].[30] Sarah Delale offers a similar reading,

arguing that de Pizan's uses of building and textile work as metaphors for compilation

"permettent de justifier la compilation en en faisant une pratique aussi autorisée et

créative que l'écriture d'invention pure : toutes deux s'appuient sur l'« ymaginacion»."

[make it possible to justify compilation by making it a practice as authoritative and creative

as the writing of pure invention: both rely on the "imagination."].[31]

By performing a *divisio* on her source-materials, a compiler breaks the connections

---

[30] Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *La couleur de la mélancolie: la fréquentation des livres au XIVe siècle, 1300-1415* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), 68; Cerquiglini-Toulet, *The Color of Melancholy*, trans. Cochrane, 64. Cerquiglini-Toulet contrasts this with Petrarch's idea that when imitating other authors, one should borrow ideas but not words. She regards Petrarch's views as more of a "Théorie, non de la compilation, mais de la transformation créatrice." [Theory, not of compilation, but of creative transformation]. Cerquiglini-Toulet, *La couleur de la mélancolie*, 68–69. I would argue that there is an element of creative transformation in de Pizan's understanding of compilation as well.

[31] Delale, "Matière à nouvelles lectures : l'imaginaire de la composition littéraire chez Christine de Pizan," 636. Indeed, in his analysis of this passage, Joël Blanchard argues that by framing the writer as a kind of architect, Christine de Pizan grants herself a particular kind of authority. Joël Blanchard, "Christine de Pizan: tradition, expérience, et traduction," *Romania* 111, no. 441/442 (1/2) (1990): 226–29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45040712. As Blanchard observes, according to Thomas Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (which was one of de Pizan's sources), while an artist can fulfil multiple "operacions," the best and highest artist is the "architect": "c'est-à-dire celui qui, dans chaque activité professionnelle, connaît l'ultime raison des choses, leur cause, leur finalité, la raison de leur usage." [which is to say one who, in each professional activity, understands the ultimate reason for things, their cause, their ends, the reason for their use]. Blanchard, 227; Karen Green, "Introduction," in *The Book of Peace*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. and trans. Karen Green et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 23, https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14. By describing herself as an architect, Christine de Pizan thus marks herself, female compilator, as a perfect artist. Like an architect, she understands the purpose of her work and knows how to place her sources according to her design. Blanchard, "Christine de Pizan: tradition, expérience, et traduction," 229. On this passage from the *Livre de paix* as an indicator of Christine de Pizan's creative practices of composition, see also: Simone Pagot, "Du bon usage de la compilation et du discours didactique : analyse du thème « guerre et paix » chez Christine de Pizan," in *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, ed. Liliane. Dulac and Bernard. Ribémont, Medievalia "Études christiniennes" 16 (Orléans: Paradigme, 1995), 41.

between them, and in re-assembling them according to the designs of her imagination, she

creates something that is different than what came before—shaped to her own particular

intentions.[32] And by privileging the remembered fragments derived from identification as

materials for one's mental constructions, readers can build lessons that are shaped to the

self.[33] Indeed, while identification intensifies the fragmentary quality of the reading

experience, it also leads to the generation of particularly useful fragments—ones that

combine the authority of the authors with that of the readers. Drawing from the metaphor

of textual excerpts as threads with which to embroider, one can regard the memories spun

from identification as threads with two plies: the wisdom of the authors and the experience

and identity of the readers themselves.[34] The core of shared experience that makes these

threads especially memorable is strengthened by the application of textual wisdom to

---

[32] Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 44–45. In "Compilation et légitimation au XVe siècle," Joël Blanchard acknowledges the creative and personal elements of compilation as Christine de Pizan practices it. As he puts it, compilation consists in a kind of violence against one's source texts one breaks them apart, pillages them for resources, and rrearranges them according to one's own designs. As the compiler alters the source texts and recombines them, the changes she makes, her arrangement of the compilation, and the way that the new text coheres reveal the compiler's "personalité" [personality], "exigence" [requirements], and "parti pris littéraire" [literary bias].Blanchard, "Compilation et légitimation," 152–54. The result is the emergence, through the compilation, of the compiler as subject. Blanchard, 152. What is created from such a compilation, as practiced by Christine de Pizan, is a new work, a "« nouveleté » dont elle revendique la mise au jour." [a "novelty" that she claims to bring to light]. Blanchard, 153.

[33] For a discussion of learning as a form of compilation and composition, see: Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 198–99.

[34] One could argue, in accordance with Carruthers's analysis, that all remembered texts are in some ways already personalized in that they are broken up and rearranged in the process of memorization—and that this personalization is enhanced when the the reader deliberately meditates upon them. Carruthers, 174, 168–69. But as I have discussed above, I see identification as in some ways facilitating this process of *meditatio*, as well as the activity of memory, whether undertaken formally or haphazardly. For more on the way Christine blends her personal experience and her authoritative sources to generate a "hybrid authority" for herself, see: Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 36–38.

those experiences.

In this sense, the fragmentary nature of identification becomes not a drawback but an opportunity—a way for readers to pinpoint what in their reading is most relevant to them. And by drawing from these remembered excerpts and using them to assemble new mental and written texts, readers become able to generate composite lessons from composite bricks and threads, lessons that enable them to find answers to vexing questions, make sense of recalcitrant works, and draw connections between individual texts and between their reading and their lives. Subjected to the imagination, which "takes the knowledge-material stored in memory and *invents new material from it*,"[35] the fragments of one's reading can be combined into a shape that does not simply reiterate what has been said before, but constitutes a new, personally relevant[36] and socially

---

[35] Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 146.

[36] In asserting the personal relevance of this composite knowledge, I draw in part from Ribémont's fascinating reading of Reason's mirror in the *Cité des dames*. In his analysis of this image, Bernard Ribémont notes that Reason's mirror is surrounded by precious stones. He links these stones to an image Christine de Pizan provides in the Mutation de Fortune, where she notes that her father possessed a treasure that included precious jewels of knowledge. Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme," 83. Of these jewels, the Christine-narrator is only able to grasp a few, but she is nonetheless able to use them, along with excerpts from other works she has read, to make a "chapelet" [circlet] in the form of her book. Ribémont, 79–81. Ribémont suggests that the image of Reason's mirror as, like the book/circlet, encrusted with precious stones, evokes Christine de Pizan's usage of encyclopedic practices of compilation in the construction of her didactic works, as encyclopedic works of the middle ages were sometimes referred to as "*specula*," based on the idea that they reflected the real world. Ribémont, 83; Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1973; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 39, 42–43. The stones Christine gathers from her reading parallel the stories that Reason tells her, and which she will use in the composition/compilation of the *Cité des dames*. Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme," 83. I find Ribémont's reading of the stones in Reason's mirror as fragmentary lessons/textual excerpts very persuasive. In light of my interests in identification and self-reflection, I would like to add that I find it interesting that what Reason's mirror shows the viewer is explicitly stated to be a reflection of herself as she really is. This linkage suggests a connection between these stones, understood as fragments of literary knowledge, and the concepts of identification and self-reflection. Reason's

actionable knowledge.[37] This is the process of composite reading that de Pizan dramatizes

in *Le Chemin de long estude*.[38]

A Composite Sibyl

This model of reading can be seen most vividly in the figure of the Cumaean Sibyl, de

Pizan's chosen guide along the Path of Long Study, and a legendary figure of feminine

wisdom who was said to reveal her prophecies by writing them on leaves and leaving them

---

mirror, made in part of textual fragments, shows the reader an image of herself. In much the same way, assembling the fragments of texts in which one can perceive aspects of oneself gives one a fuller picture of one's own identity, and enables one to better exercise one's reason.

[37] On the civic utility of the knowledge that Christine de Pizan presents herself as gathering ove the course of this work, see: Helen Solterer, "Christine's Way: The *Querelle du Roman de la rose* and the Ethics of a Political Response," in *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 171–74. In acting on this knowledge, readers can perform a kind of *phronesis*, using their past reading as their guide to ethical action in the present. The ability to use the lessons of one's past reading as material for *phronesis*, to mentally build with the remembered pieces of texts and use them to construct "an ethically appropriate response to a situation," is, as Carr argues, one of the chief skills de Pizan wishes to teach her readers, both in the *Chemin* and elsewhere. Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 77–79, 83, 164–66, 182. Because memory was understood as essential for ethical action, and because the experiences of reading stored in memory could inform ethical action, de Pizan is not necessarily innovating in proposing this use of reading so much as she is providing a particularly vivid illustration of the value of reading in this way, and the role identification can play in this kind of reading. Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 68, 164, 179–80.

[38] It is similar to, but less aggressive than, the process Carr sees de Pizan as promoting through the figure of Semiramis in the *Book of the City of Ladies*, whereby the reader dominates the text, deliberately reinterpreting misogynist works for her own benefit and discarding every text she cannot make useful, "the meaning of those texts brought under the rulership of a strong, decisive, and capable reader, whose guiding power reconstructs and strengthens the pieces of the texts in her memory according to her purpose." Carr, *Story and Philosophy*, 78. As I understand it, the grounding of identification in chance and contingency means that the pieces of the text a reader has to work with are in some ways predetermined. I share with Carr, however, the sense that the portions of texts that a reader has "reinterpreted" (in my understanding, through identification) function as privileged mental building materials. Carr, 77–79.

to be scattered by the wind.[39] By choosing as her mentor a figure who reveals divine truth

through written fragments, and by constructing this figure from fragments of her own

reading, de Pizan potently allegorizes the method of reading she explores throughout her

works: a method whereby one derives meaning from reading by gathering the scattered

leaves in which one recognizes oneself and binding them into one's own personal codex. By

analyzing de Pizan's construction of the Sibyl, I intend to demonstrate her status as both a

symbol and product of composite reading strategies. And by examining this figure's status

as a mentor to Christine, I will elucidate the case de Pizan makes for the value of composite

reading as a strategy for learning from the works one reads.

The choice of the Cumaean Sibyl as a mentor is particularly relevant both to

Christine de Pizan's own figuration of herself as a writer and to her concern with matters of

fragmentation and compilation.[40] Among the best known of the ten sibyls enumerated by

---

[39] In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas tells the Sibyl: "don't commit your words to the rustling, scattering leaves— / sport of the winds that whirl them all away. Sing them yourself, I beg you!" Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), bk. 6, vv.89–91, p. 185. While Aeneas does not explicitly state that the Sibyl habitually writes her prophecies on leaves, the specificity of the request implies that this is one way that she delivers her prophecies. The idea that the Cumaean Sibyl transmitted her prophecies via leaves was well established by the time of Pizan's writing as can be seen in Dante's *Paradiso*, wherein Dante writes of his vanishing vision and states: "così al vento ne le foglie levi / si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla." ["thus in the wind, on the fluttering leaves, the / Sibyl's meaning was lost"]. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 3: Paradiso*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.65-66, pp. 662–663, PDF, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucla/reader.action?docID=618597&query=paradiso.

[40] Much has been said about Christine de Pizan's use of Sibyls and sibylline figures in her works. For an overview of the Sibyl as an authorizing figure in the works of Christine de Pizan, as well as a figure for de Pizan herself, see: Kevin Brownlee, "Structures of Authority in Christine de Pizan's *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*," in *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 131–50, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014631470; Jessica R. Weinstein, "The Sibylline Voices of Christine de Pizan" (Houston, Texas, Rice University, 2006), https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/20668; and Thelma Fenster, "Who's a Heroine? The Example of Christine de Pizan," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and

Varro and reported in Lactnaius's *Divine Institutes*,[41] the Cumaean Sibyl plays a key role in

Virgil's *Aeneid* and is mentioned in his fourth *Ecologue*,[42] is discussed in Augustine's *City of*

God,[43] and is mentioned by Dante towards the end of his *Divine Comedy*.[44] Like the other

sibyls of legend, she is a female prophet who is capable of seeing the future through ecstatic

visions, and like the other sibyls, she has a long history of being treated as a figure of

wisdom and authority, both in classical Greek tradition, where the Sibyls (or one

archetypical Sibyl) were regarded as communicating the words of the gods, and in the early

and medieval Christian tradition, where the sibyls were regarded as foretelling the coming

of Christ.[45]

A number of key stories associated with the Cumaean Sibyl suggest her

appropriateness as a mentor for Christine, given Christine's status as a figure of de Pizan

herself. As mentioned above, the Cumaean Sibyl was said to write her prophecies on leaves

---

Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 115–28; Madeleine Jeay, "Traversée par le verbe : l'écriture de soi comme geste prophétique chez Christine de Pizan," *Dalhousie French Studies* 47 (Summer 1999): 13–14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40837271; Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction »*, 446–54.

[41] Bernard McGinn, "*Teste David Cum Sibylla*: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages," in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 9. As McGinn notes, while other lists of the Sibyls existed, Varro's now-lost list of ten Sibyls, "preserved in Lactantius," was "the most influential on the later Christian tradition." McGinn, 9.

[42] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, bk. 6; Virgil, "Eclogue 4," in *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library 63 (1916; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), v. 4, p. 48, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL063/1916/volume.xml.

[43] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bk. 10, chap. 27, p.433; bk. 18, chap. 23, pp.849–852.

[44] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, canto 33, vv. 65–66, page 662.

[45] McGinn, "Teste David Cum Sibylla," 8–16.

and leave them to be scattered by the wind,[46] thus forcing anyone who wanted to understand her meaning to collect and reassemble the fragments. This enforcement of fragmentary learning is also visible in another tale associated with the Cumaean Sibyl, in which she brings nine books to Rome and offers to sell them to Tarquinius Priscus at a high price.[47] After Tarquinus refuses to pay her the amount she requests, she burns three of the books in front of him, and then returns the following day to offer him the remaining six books at the same price as the original nine. When he again refuses, she burns three more. At last, Tarquinius agrees to pay the price of the original nine books for the three unburned volumes.[48]

This story of the Sibyl's life is significant in that it relates intimately to de Pizan's concerns with the fragmentation of literary knowledge and the possibility of deriving wisdom from these fragments. After the Sibyl burns her books, Tarquinius Priscus is compelled to do a kind of regenerative reading, reconstructing the material of nine complete books from the three that remain to him. Like a marginalized reader, unable to identify with the majority of the material in a text, Tarquinius only has pieces of knowledge to work with—the rest are inaccessible. And yet by demanding the same price, regardless

---

[46] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, bk. 6, vv. 89–91, p.185.

[47] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 50. As Jesse Keskiaho notes, a number of variations of the legend exist, which differ regarding the number of books delivered and the identity of the books' bearer, whether an anonymous old woman, an unnamed Sibyl, or one Sibyl in particular. Jesse Keskiaho, "Re-visiting the libri Sibyllini: some remarks on their nature in Roman legend and experience," in *Studies in Ancient Oracles and Divination*, ed. Mika Kajava (Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013), 146–51. I choose to focus on the version of the legend of the Sibylline Books recounted by Boccaccio in his *De Mulieribus Claris*, as Andrea Tarnowski, in her edition of *Le Chemin de Longue Étude*, cites it as one of Pizan's sources for information about the Sibyl. Tarnowski, ed., *Le Chemin de longue étude*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. and trans. Andrea Tarnowski (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000), 118n1.

[48] Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 50.

of the number of the books, the Sibyl insists that these fragments have as much value as the

complete works. She displays, in an intense fashion, that it is possible to derive a kind of

wisdom that is full and complete from a fundamentally incomplete set of literary works.

Thus, de Pizan's choice of the Sibyl as Christine's mentor can be understood as

deeply relevant to her own interest in the process of creating meaning from fragments and

using those meanings for immediate personal, social, and political ends.[49] And de Pizan

compounds the Sibyl's rich literary association with themes of fragmentation and

compilation by virtue of the way she constructs her as a character. For de Pizan's Sibyl is a

fundamentally composite figure,[50] created from excerpts of a variety of works that de Pizan

---

[49] For analysis of the social and political implications of de Pizan's use of the sibyl as a mentor, and of her framing of herself as a sibylline figure, see: Solterer, "Christine's Way," 166–70. See also: Fabienne Pomel, "La Sibylle, guide et double de Christine dans l'autre monde des lettres: *Le Chemin de longue étude* de Christine de Pizan," in *La Sibylle: Parole et representation*, ed. Monique Bouquet and Françoise Morzadec (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004), para. 35, HTML, https://books.openedition.org/pur/30370; Fenster, "Who's a Heroine?," 118.

[50] In her analysis of de Pizan's use of Sibylline figures in her works, Thelma Fenster notes that de Pizan constructed these figures from traits of multiple sibyls. As she states:

> The classical and medieval worlds knew many sibyls, and their characteristics did not necessarily remain discrete in popular—or even educated—minds. 'The Sibyl' could be an amalgam of sibyls, a mixed bag of traits from both Jewish and Christian sibylline figures that afforded medieval writers latitude in their depictions of her. Thus if Christine patterned her represented self after the Sibyl, it is also true that she redrew the Sibyl to suit the image she held of herself and her own possibilities. For that project, not all aspects of the inherited sibyl figures were equally germane. But the sibyl's great age and mortality, the tradition of her books of prophecy, and above all, her emblematic voice, served the exemplary portrait Christine envisaged. Fenster, "Who's a Heroine?," 116.

Indeed, as Jessica R. Weinstein argues, the figure of the sibyl affords this kind of composite construction and repurposing. Because there were so many different characteristics associated with the Sibyl, and so many different sibyls, "the Sibyl could . . . be redrawn to suit Christine's shifting image of herself; or to be more precise, to suit the image of herself that was most valuable for her current purpose . . . Christine's sibylline figures and voices have been individually tailor-made from multiple and varying traditions to meet the specific demands of the text in which they appear." Weinstein, "Sibylline Voices," 17.
  Fabienne Pomel also notes that "La figure de la Sibylle se construit dans un habile jeu de miroirs avec des doubles internes et externes, grâce à l'intertextualité signalée d'emblée par le titre,

has read and likely identified with,[51] including Boethius's *Consolation*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Augustine's *De civitate Dei* [City of God], and Dante's *Commedia* [Divine Comedy].[52] And by making this composite figure the guide who leads her literary avatar along the path of her allegorical dream vision, all the way to the cosmic wisdom she needs to answer her questions, de Pizan demonstrates the possibility of the individual reader assembling personally relevant knowledge from her reading, even if all she has to work with are fragments.[53]

That the Sibyl represents a kind of knowledge that is both composite and personalized can be seen through the complex of literary allusions with which she is constructed, prominent among them Boethius's Lady Philosophy. As mentioned above,

---

citation de la *Divine Comédie*," [The figure of the Sibyl is constructed in a skillful game of mirrors with internal and external doubles, thanks to the intertextuality immediately indicated by the title, a citation of the *Divine Comedy*] as well as allusions to the *Aeneid* and the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Pomel, "guide et double," par. 4, par. 9.

[51] It is impossible to know whether the historical de Pizan truly identified with various figures in the works she read, but for the purposes of my arguments, here, I will be focusing my analysis on the ways that de Pizan's theories of identification appear to be represented in elements of her writing process: namely, the selection of details from texts that bear similarities to details of her own life, as she depicts it through her heavily autobiographical portrayal of Christine in her various works. Thus, when there are strong parallels between autobiographical elements of de Pizan's writing and the works she has chosen as sources for elements of the *Chemin*, I will speak as though de Pizan has "identified" with these works.

[52] It is unclear in many cases what versions of these texts Christine de Pizan used, as many of them existed in various editions, and she often relied upon compilations and translations for her sources. Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction »*, 19–20, 406. Nonetheless, these are among the works she alludes to, in one form or another, in her construction of the figure of the Cumaean Sibyl.

[53] See Sarah Kay's reading of the Fountain of Knowledge in the *Chemin* as a reminder that "in order to conceive of the unity of the universal we don't have to experience every one of its particulars." Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 160. While I don't adopt the Aristotelian framework of Kay's argument (that the particular alone can be experienced and the universal alone can be known), her analysis of Pizan's epistemology nonetheless parallels my conception of Pizan's literary philosophy: that even from partial insights, one can construct a knowledge that is complete in its utility to the individual and to the world.

when reading the *Consolation*, Christine identifies with Boethius. And from this identification with Boethius and his needs, de Pizan derives the image of a mentor who can meet those needs: a figure who bears a striking resemblance to Lady Philosophy, and who meets her pupil's needs in a similar way: by combining the wisdom of the scholars with personalized lessons for her pupil. In drawing from these particular characteristics of Philosophy in crafting the Sibyl, de Pizan marks her as a product of the composite reading process itself, whereby one assembles fragments of the wisdom of the *auctores*—fragments that are pre-shaped to the self—to create one's own personalized wisdom.

As a powerful figure of female wisdom, the Cumaean Sibyl is immediately analogous to Lady Philosophy, and there are a significant number of similarities between de Pizan's portrayal of her and Boethius's portrayal of his own mentor.[54] Indeed, de Pizan includes nods to Lady Philosophy throughout her introduction of the Sibyl, although some of the characteristics that the Sibyl shares with Philosophy exist in a more modest form in the former. Thus, like the wise Philosophy, who despite "her tireless energy," is visibly "advanced in years,"[55] de Pizan's Sibyl is a woman "Qui moult avoit honneste et sage / Semblant, et pesante maniere. / Ne jeune ne jolie n'yere, / Mais ancianne et moult rassise" ["With a very honest and wise / Appearance, and a solemn manner. / Neither young, nor

---

[54] A number of scholars have commented on the resemblance between the Sibyl and Lady Philosophy, as well as the parallel roles they play in Christine de Pizan's work and Boethius's. See, for example: Glynnis M. Cropp, "Boèce et Christine de Pizan," *Le Moyen Age* 87, no. 3–4 (1981): 393; Pomel, "guide et double," para. 9; Tarnowski, "Pallas Athena," 151.

[55] Boethius, *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), bk. 1, prose 1, p. 3.

pretty, nor slender, / But old and very sober"].[56] Like Philosophy, she wears sturdy

clothing—Philosophy is described as adorned in a robe made "of imperishable material"

whereas the Sibyl's tunic is "Par semblant si fort et durable" ["in appearance very strong

and durable"].[57] In addition, like Philosophy, there is an element of divinity about the Sibyl,

although she is not as glorious as she might be. Lady Philosophy has glowing eyes, an

appearance that inspires awe, and is so tall that she reaches the heavens, yet her robe is

dusty and torn by the hands of would-be philosophers.[58] Likewise, the Sibyl reminds

Christine of "la deesse de savoir" ["the goddess of wisdom"], Pallas Athena, who was "de

grant scïence renommee" ["for great learning famous"] yet Christine suspects that she is

not a goddess because she "n'ot couronne en sa teste" ["had no crown on her head"].[59] De

Pizan even gives a nod to Philosophy's great size, although her portrayal of the Sibyl is a bit

more earthly in comparison. In the very first line in which she mentions the Sibyl, de Pizan

describes her as "Une dame de grant corsage" [A woman of large body], although it is

unclear if this is because she towers over Christine or because she is "n'yere" [not thin].[60]

       Perhaps the most important similarity between the Sibyl and Philosophy, however,

---

[56] *Chemin*, 460-463; Kelly Ramke Lardin, trans., *The Book of the Path of Long Learning*, By Christine de Pizan (self-pub.: Createspace, 2018), 460–63, Kindle.

[57] Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 1, prose 1, p. 4; *Chemin*, 471; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 470-71.

[58] Boethius, bk. 1, prose 1, p. 4.

[59] *Chemin*, 479-485; Ramke Lardin, trans. *Long Learning*, 483-485.

[60] *Chemin*, 459, 462. In her translation of *Le Chemin de longue étude*, Andrea Tarnowski translates "yere" as "légère," and I have followed her example. Andrea Tarnowski, ed. and trans., *Le Chemin de longue étude*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. with notes and facing-page translation by Andrea Tarnowski (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000), p. 115. I have been unable to find a direct Middle French translation that makes sense for "yere" or possible alternative spellings such as "iere."

is the way that these figures combine the wisdom of scholarship with personalized

mentorship and compassion. In the *Consolation*, Philosophy is presented as a figure of

authority, the companion of famous philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, and Seneca.[61] Yet

she is also a highly personal mother-figure to the Boethius-narrator, who describes herself

as nursing him on her milk and weaning him on solid food to help his mind to mature,

Throughout the work she explains complicated philosophical concepts in a way that the

Boethius-narrator can understand them, and she leads him towards the answers to his

questions by combining the emotional and aesthetic appeal of poetry with the solid reason

of prose.[62] She is thus associated with both the heights of scholarship and the intimate role

of parent and teacher. In combining a personal and maternal compassion for Boethius with

access to the highest levels of thought, she is able to present profound truths about the

universe in a way that is tailored to Boethius's own needs, questions, and fears. Indeed,

upon noting that his vision is clouded by tears, she wipes Boethius's eyes with her dress.[63]

Perceiving that he is too emotionally disturbed to bear the "stronger remedies" of pure

philosophical discourse, she tempers her prose lessons by starting slowly and by

interspersing them with poetry.[64] She takes the time to ask questions of Boethius in order

to determine the nature of his mental distress and how best to treat it.[65] And she gives

---

[61] Boethius, *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*, bk. 1, prose 2-3, pp. 5–7.

[62] Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 20–23.

[63] Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 1, prose 2, p. 6.

[64] Boethius, bk. 1, prose 5, p. 15; prose 6, pp. 16-18; prose 7, p. 19. 15-19; Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*, 19–24.

[65] Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 1, prose 6, pp. 16-17.

examples from Boethius's own life in order to supplement the points that she is making and display their relevance to him.[66]

So, too, does the Cumaean Sibyl display a personal connection to de Pizan and tailor her didactic approach to her needs. This Sibyl is clearly shown to be eager to teach: Christine mentions that the Sibyl "me vouloit / tout monstrer quanque yert en la voye" ["wanted to show me / All there was in the path"] and "me voult exposer / Quanque voyons, sans reposer" ["wanted to explain everything / That we saw to me, without resting"].[67] Yet the Sibyl carefully controls what Christine views along their journey by selecting the path that is best suited to her needs.[68] Thus, she wisely prohibits Christine from walking on the path that leads to hell, but she also recommends against her walking on paths that would be too difficult for her to follow.[69] And among the numerous paths that are "reservez aux soubtilz / Selon leurs divers appetis" [reserved for the clever, according to their various inclinations], she picks "le beau chemin" [the beautiful path], "plus que parchemin/ Ouvert" [More open than parchment],[70] which is "reservé aux lettrez / Qui veulent aler par le monde, / Sans querir voye trop parfonde" [reserved for the lettered who

---

[66] Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 2, prose 3, pp. 23-4. Philosophy's tailoring of her argument to Boethius's needs and the personalization of her argument bears a resemblance to Pizan's characterization of "the love and fear of Christ" in the *Book of the Three Virtues*, in that both pedagogues recognize the need of adjusting their rhetorical approach to their students. That being said, Pizan portrays the love and fear of Christ as being much less gentle in his approach than Philosophy is in the *Consolation*.

[67] *Chemin*, 1294-95, 1287-88; Ramke Lardin, trans., 1294-95, 1287-88.

[68] *Chemin*, 887-958.

[69] *Chemin*, 917-9.

[70] It is unclear exactly what Pizan means to convey by this quality of openness, whether it is ease of travel, ready access, or another characteristic. Because of this, I have left my translation ambiguous.

want to go about the world without seeking too deep of a path] and which is only accessible

by those who are "diligens de comprendre / Et se delitent en apprendre"[71] ["eager to

understand / And delight in learning"].[72] Wanting to gratify Christine's love of learning but

fearing that she will "drown" in knowledge that is too deep for her to receive, the Sibyl

picks the path that Christine is most capable of following without injury.[73] And in much the

same way as Philosophy cares deeply for Boethius, as a mother might for her child, the

Sibyl refers to Christine as her "fille" [daughter][74] and tells her that she is helping her in

part because, as she says, "pour le bien de ton memoire; / Que voy abille a concevoir, / Je

t'aim" [for the goodness of your mind, which I see is gifted in understanding, I love you].[75]

Her maternal affection for Christine's personal strengths leads her to love Christine herself,

and this love is part of the reason the Sibyl has come to guide her.[76] In using the deeply

---

[71] *Chemin*, 925-6, 957, 932-3, 934-6, 941-2.

[72] Ramke Lardin, *Long Learning*, 941–42.

[73] *Chemi*n, 938. Specifically, the Sibyl tells Pizan that they will not be following "trop parfonde" [too deep] a path, "Car qui en trop parfonde mare / Se met, souvent noye ou s'esgare" [Because one who gets himself into too deep a sea often drowns or goes astray]. *Chemin*, 936-8. On the Dantean echoes in this passage, see: Merkel, "imitazione dantesca," 201.

[74] *Chemin*, 490. In discussing the ways that the Christine de Pizan presents the Sibyl as a kind of authorizing foremother, Kevin Brownlee observes that "fille" is the first word the Sibyl speaks to Christine in this work. Kevin Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy and the Problem of the Father: Christine de Pizan and Dante," in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 211–13, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035010498.

[75] *Chemin*, 498-500.

[76] As Fabienne Pomel notes, the Sibyl and Christine take on the role of master and disciple, with the Sibyl teaching and Christine following. However, as she observes, there is also an affectionate quality to the relationship between the two, as the Sibyl refers to Christine as an "amie" [friend/love] and as a daughter. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 17. For further analysis of the relationship between the teacherly and the maternal in de Pizan's depiction of the Sibyl, see: Lechat, « Dire Par Fiction », 446–47.

personal figure of Lady Philosophy as a model for Christine, de Pizan thus indicates the profoundly personal nature of the program of study she presents. In order for one's reading to be valuable, one must attend to the material that personally resonates with oneself. And in creating composites from this material, one will necessary produce a kind of knowledge that is both authoritative and personal.

This combination of the authoritative and the personal is likewise attested in the way that Christine de Pizan constructs the Sibyl's biography from a collection of sources, prominent among them the *Ovide moralisé*, a 14th century Christian rewriting of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[77] From this work, de Pizan carefully selects details of the Sibyl's life to incorporate into her narrative, details which appear to be chosen on the basis of their similarity with de Pizan's own life and goals.[78] And she supplements the information she

[77] See Tarnowski, ed., *Chemin*, 118n1.

[78] A number of authors have noted the similarities between Christine de Pizan's self-presentation and her portrayal of the Sibyl in this work. Fabienne Pomel, for example, discusses at length the similarities between Christine de Pizan and the Cumaean Sibyl, as well as the uses to which Christine puts this figure in legitimizing her own voice as a female writer. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 5. As she states: "la Sibylle fonctionne aussi, à l'instar d'autres figures féminines dans l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan, comme un double en tant qu'incarnation au féminin de la voix idéale de l'écrivain." [The Sibyl also functions, like other feminine figures in Christine de Pizan's œuvre, like a double—as a feminine embodiment of the ideal voice of the writer]. Pomel, para. 26. Indeed, as Bärbel Zühlke argues, the Sibyl is a figure by which CdP represents her own character traits and her aspirations: "Dans l'autoreprésentation de Christine, la sibylle remplit une fonction-clé. Elle sert de 'personnage d'identification,' c'est-à-dire qu'elle montre les qualités que Christine prétend posséder elle-même ou qu'elle aimerait acquérir" [In Christine's self representation, the sibyl fulfils a key function. She serves as an "identification character," which is to say that she displays qualities that Christine claims to possess herself or that she would like to acquire]. Bärbel Zühlke, "Christine de Pizan—le 'moi' dans le texte et l'image," in *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 234.Weinstein likewise notes that the Sibyl was "a prophetic figure with whom Chrisitne might identify." Weinstein, "Sibylline Voices," 24. I will discuss more specific parallels between Christine de Pizan and the Sibyl, and sources that concern these parallels, as they come up.

derives from this work with accounts of the Sibyl's life from other sources, [79] accounts that,

like those from the *Ovide Moralisée*, display marked parallels with de Pizan's literary self-

presentation and stated aspirations. The biography de Pizan constructs for the Sibyl thus

reinforces the idea that her chosen mentor is a composite of portions of texts with which de

Pizan has identified,[80] and thus a figure for the composite knowledge produced as a result

of composite reading.

The basic idea, contained in her very name, that the Cumaean Sibyl is a wise female

prophet from Italy, is one de Pizan would have certainly been able to identify with, as she

herself was a woman from Italy who was committed to the pursuit of wisdom.[81] Indeed, de

Pizan explicitly mentions this resemblance between herself and the Sibyl towards the end

of the *Chemin*, when the Sibyl introduces Christine to Reason, stating of her: "comme moy

---

[79] Andrea Tarnowski identifies the *Ovide Moralisé*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Boccaccio's *de mulieribus claris* as sources for Pizan's biography of the Sibyl. de Pizan, *Chemin*, 118n1.

[80] In "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude*," Sarah Kay also brings up the idea that Pizan "identifies" herself with various female figures in the Chemin de longue estude. Kay is not describing the same phenomenon I am, however. Rather, she is discussing the way that Pizan evokes certain powerful, disembodied female figures in her work, such as Calliope, Earth, and Sagece, that represent one of her particular characteristics, such as her melancholy or her status as a poet. Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 160, 163, 166. By casting herself as these figures in the *Chemin*, Christine elevates her own experiences and characteristics to the level of universal ideas in order to explore how it is possible, in an Aristotelian sense, to move from particular experiences to universal knowledge. Kay, 175. Notably, Kay does not include the Sibyl as a character that Pizan "identifies" herself with, perhaps because the Sibyl is too particular and human.

[81] Many scholars have commented on the fact that de Pizan and the Sibyl have in common their Italian origins. See, for example: Pomel, "guide et double," para. 26; Karen Green, "Philosophy and Metaphor: The Significance of Christine's 'Blunders,'" *Parergon* 22, no. 1 (2005): 125, https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2005.0025; Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 227; Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction »*, 453–54. As Karen Green comments: In the Cumean sibyl, who came like her from Italy, who was spoken of by Virgil, who was in turn described by Dante as his guide through the underworld, Christine found a powerful and authoritative precursor." Green, "Philosophy and Metaphor," 125.

fust nee / En Ytale" ["like me she was born / in Italy"].[82] De Pizan goes beyond the basic resemblances of gender and nationality in her construction of the Sibyl, however, adding to this figure by judiciously selecting portions of accounts of the Sibyl's life that resonate with her own experience and desires.

Thus, from the *Ovide Moralisé* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, de Pizan derives the narrative of the Cumaean Sibyl as the prophetess responsible guiding Aeneas, a narrative which evokes her own desire for political influence.[83] As the Sibyl relates: "Celle suis, qui mena jadis / Eneas, l'exillé Troyen; /Sans autre conduit ne moyen / Par mi enfer le convoyay, / Puis on Ytalie l'avoyay" [I am that one who once led Aeneas, the Trojan exile; without another guide or means, I conveyed him through the middle of hell, then directed him to Italy].[84] She likewise reports how she told Aeneas of the foundation of Rome, and of the "Princes qui le monde tendroient / En leur baillie" [Princes who will hold the world in their power] who would descend from him.[85] By relating the tale of the assistance the Sibyl provided to Aeneas, prince of Troy and legendary founder of Rome, Pizan identifies the Cumaean Sibyl as a counselor to the powerful, a position Pizan herself aspired to, as evidenced throughout her body of work.[86] This aspiration is clearly visible in the dedication of the *Path of Long Study* itself, wherein Pizan asks Charles VI of France and various powerful French dukes to

---

[82] *Chemin*, 6296-97; Ramke Lardin, trans., 6296-97.

[83] *Chemin*, 596-617.

[84] *Chemin*, 596-600.

[85] *Chemin*, 608-609.

[86] As evinced in part by the large number of her works that can be classified as "mirrors for princes," as well as numerous works that contain political advice and theory. Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, 27, 18–25.

consider the debate put forward in her poem—a debate which concerns the proper

qualifications and behavior of a monarch and includes strong anti-war messages, and

which is clearly calculated to appeal to the political agency of its desired readers.[87] By

highlighting the Sibyl's political agency, Christine de Pizan thus marks her as a figure of her

own desire to positively influence the French powers.[88]

     Similarly appropriate is de Pizan's characterization of the Sibyl as a writer of poetry.

De Pizan mentions this characteristic at three points in the Sibyl's biography: first, by

identifying the Cumaean Sibyl, along with her sister Sibyls, as writers of prophetic verse,

then by alluding to the legend of Tarquinius Priscus, and finally by commenting on the

function the Sibyl's "verse" had in inspiring Virgil by quoting from Virgil's *Ecologues*.[89] The

tradition of the Sibyls as creators of prophetic verse is a long one, carried from antiquity

into the Middle ages through translations and compilations of Sybilline verses, both

---

[87] *Chemin*, 1-60. These dukes included Charles V's uncles Jean de Berry and Philippe de Bourgogne, as well as his brother, Louis d'Orleans, all of whom (along with Queen Isabeau, to whom a copy of the work was also presented) were involved in profoundly divisive and destabilizing power-struggles concerning who should govern France during the king's intermittent periods of psychosis. Tarnowski, ed., *Chemin*, 87n3; Tracy Adams, "Christine de Pizan, Isabeau of Bavaria, and Female Regency," *French Historical Studies* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 2–14, https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2008-011; Gilbert Ouy, Christine Reno, and Inès Villela-Petit, *Album Christine de Pizan*, ed. Olivier Delsaux and Tania Van Hemelryck (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 317–43, 379–412.

[88] *Chemin*, 541-44, 620-634. As Fabienne Pomel notes, Christine de Pizan's partial identification of herself with the figure of the prophetess enables her to "légitimer le rôle de conseiller politique et moral qu'elle entend jouer envers le roi" [legitimize the role of political and moral counselor that she intends to play for the king] as well as to grant her words a kind of divine authority. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 35. Thelma Fenster comments similarly on the role of the Sibyl in the *Cité des dames* as a political counselor: "through the figure of the Sibyl, Christine is able to promote the role that women can play in public life." Fenster, "Who's a Heroine?," 118. On the Sibyl as a figure of political prophecy, and on the relationship of the prophetic and the political in the *Chemin de Lonc estude*, see also: Solterer, "Christine's Way," 166–71.

[89] On the tradition of Virgil as inspired by the Sibyl, see: McGinn, "Teste David Cum Sibylla," 14.

authentic pagan versions and later versions composed by Jewish and Christian authors.[90]

Among these translations are those contained in Augustine's *City of God*,[91] a source that de

Pizan was familiar with.[92] In Book 18, ch. 23, Augustine includes a translated Sibylline

poem, a prediction of the coming of Christ, which he identifies as having been written by

either the Erythrean or the Cumaean Sibyl.[93] Drawing, then, from her reading on the

tradition of the Sibyls in general, and the Cumaean Sibyl more specifically, as writers of

poetry, de Pizan draws a parallel between herself and her allegorical mentor.[94] Both are

---

[90] McGinn, 10–17.

[91] McGinn, 17.

[92] There is some debate over whether Christine de Pizan read Augustine's *City of God* in the original Latin or not. A number of the quotations of patristic authors she uses in her works come not from the originals, but from Thomas Hibernicus's *Le Manipulus Florum*, a popular florilegium containing quotations from "ancient, patristic, and medieval sources." Earl Jeffrey Richards, "In Search of a Feminist Patrology: Christine de Pizan and *Les Glorieux Dotteurs* of the Church," *Mystics Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1995): 3, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20717235. That being said, de Pizan's references to the *City of God* in her her *Livre de la Cité des Dames*, as well as certain structural and symbolic similarities between the works speaks to her familiarity with Augustine's work. Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134. And it would have been available to her in the 1375 French translation of Raoul de Presles, *Cité de dieu*. Marilynn Desmond, "Christine de Pizan's Feminist Self-Fashioning and the Invention of Dido," in *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, New Edition, Medieval Cultures 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 202; Richards, "In Search of a Feminist Patrology: Christine de Pizan and *Les Glorieux Dotteurs* of the Church," 6.

[93] Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 18, chap. 23, pp. 849–852.

[94] As Pomel argues: "Christine de Pizan offre donc une appropriation originale de cette figure héritée de l'Antiquité : la Sibylle devient une lettrée, une lectrice, incarnant un idéal de clergie au féminin. Son rôle initiatique auprès de Christine et les jeux d'intertextualité l'annexent à une stratégie qui vise à imposer et légitimer la femme écrivain et laïque en l'investissant dans le champ de l'écrit et du savoir." [Christine de Pizan therefore offers an original appropriation of this figure inherited from Antiquity : the Sibyl becomes a scholar, a reader, embodying an ideal of feminine clergy. Her initiatory role towards Christine and intertextual games annex her to a strategy that aims to impose and legitimize the female writer and layperson by investing her in the field of writing and of wisdom]. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 37. See also Dina de Rentiis's argument that: "En choisissant la Sibylle, figure féminine au prestige à la fois grand et limité par rapport aux *auctores*, comme guide, comme maître à 'suivre' et à 'imiter,' comme modèle auquel s'identifier,

writers of poetry, and while Pizan's writing aspires to nothing so glorious as predicting

events on the scale of the Coming of Christ, she shares with the Sibyl the tactic of using

poetry as a medium for communicating messages with implications for the future of the

French kingdom and its people."[95]

Similarly, from the *Ovide Moralisé*, Pizan derives a description of the Sibyl that

appears to reflect her own desire to have her works known to posterity. In the fourteenth

Christine confirme--sans pecher par orgueil--son propre statut de femme *auteur*." [In choosing the Sibyl, feminime figure of simultaneously great and limited prestige in relation to the *auctores*, as guide, as master to "follow" and to "imitate," as model with which to identify, Christine confirms—without the sin of pride—her own status as a woman *auteur*]. Dina De Rentiis, "'Sequere me:' 'Imitatio' dans la 'Divine Comédie' et dans le 'Livre du Chemin de long estude.'," in *The city of scholars : new approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margarete Zimmermann, European cultures 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 42, http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&doc_number=006406172&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA. As Weinstein puts it: "For Christine's attempts to authorize herself as a writer, the medieval development of the Sibyl seen in the Roman d'Eneas and De claris mulieribus furnished a particularly apposite iconographic model of a book-learned woman who was both a guide or teacher and an author of advisory or educational texts." Weinstein, "Sibylline Voices," 20.

[95] As Lori Walters puts it: "Like Christine, the sibyl has composed many beautiful verses and produced several large volumes about the time to come." Lori J. Walters, "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom: The *Chemin de lonc estude* in the Queen's Manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 4431," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 5, no. 2 (2016): 233, https://doi.org/10.1353/dph.2016.0013. For an analysis of the ways Christine de Pizan frames herself not only as a writer but also as a prophetess through her similarities with the Sibyl, see Pomel's comment: "Ce rôle de la Sibylle comme double révèle la manière dont l'écrivain se rêve elle-même en prophétesse. De même que les Sibylles ont annoncé la venue d'un sauveur dans le Christ, Christine, dans le débat final, annoncerait dans la figure du roi idéal un sauveur dans l'ordre politique." [The role of the Sibyl as double reveals the manner in which the author imagines herself as a prophetess. Just as the Sibyls announced the coming of a savior in Christ, Christine, in the final debate, announces in the figure of the ideal king a savior of the political order]. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 32. For analysis of the way Christine de Pizan uses the discourse of feminine prophetic writing in crafting her self-image, see: Jeay, "Traversée par le verbe." For an analysis of Christine de Pizan's engagement with the prophetic tradition and staging of herself as a prophetic figure in her works, see: Karen Green, "Christine de Pizan and the Prophetic Tradition," in *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009* (Florence: Alinea, 2013), 51–61; Fabienne Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice. Les métamorphoses de Christine de Pizan dans *Le Chemin de longue étude*," in *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends, Interférences (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016), 215–30, http://books.openedition.org/pur/35533.

book of the *Ovide moralisé*, the Sibyl tells Aeneas how is it that she has lived so long. She

relates that Apollo sought her love, but before she would deign to grant it, she picked up a

handful of sand from the ground and asked to live as many years as there were grains of

sand in her hand, which turned out to be one thousand. However, she forgot to ask for

eternal youth, and thus she aged over the subsequent seven hundred years until her body

became reduced, as she recounts, to nothing.[96] As she states: "Mes lors serai je si retraite, /

Vielle et laide et aneantie, / Que nulz homs ne cuiderot mie / Qu'Apollo m'eüst onc amee."

[But now I have become so shrunken, old and ugly and annihilated, that no man could

believe at all that Apollo once loved me].[97] She follows by remarking that "nul hom ne me

choisira / Fors à la vois tant seulement: / N'iere cogneüe autrement" [no man would notice

me, if not for my voice alone: I would not be known otherwise].[98] Drawing on this

description, Pizan has her Sibyl state that: "mon corps tout anïenti / Devint, si qu'a pou ne

veoient / La gent, mais ma voix ilz ouoïent, / Qui trop durement leur plaisot / Pour le voir

---

[96] Cornelis de Boer, ed., *Ovide moralisé: poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, vol. 5 (Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1938), bk. 4, vv. 915–965, https://archive.org/details/DeBoerOvideMoralise5. The Sibyl of the *Ovide moralisé* is highly critical of her appearance, describing herself as as "Vielle" [old], "seche" [dry], "regreille," [ironed flat], "laide" [unlovely], "aneantie" [annihilated], and "forment muee" [greatly changed]. de Boer, bk. 4, vv. 961–68. In her own description, de Pizan focuses less on the Sibyl's outward appearance and more on the dignity of her bearing, though she does comment that the Sibyl is neither young, pretty, nor thin. *Chemin*, 462. As Pomel notes: "Au contraire, dans *l'Ovide moralisé*, la Sibylle souligne son statut de mortelle et ce texte accentue dans la figure de la Sibylle de Cumes l'aspect négatif du vieillissement, interprété comme un châtiment de la présomption de longévité." [In contrast, in the *Ovide moralisé*, the Sibyl highlights her status as a mortal, and the text accentuates in the figure of the Cumaean Sibyl the negative aspect of aging, interpreted as a punishment for the presumption of longevity]. Pomel, "guide et double," n53. Christine de Pizan, describing a figure in whom she sees herself and lacking the ulterior motive of admonitory moralization, portrays the Sibyl with significantly more compassion.

[97] de Boer, *Ovide moralisé*, bk. 4, vv. 964-67.

[98] de Boer, *Ovide moralisé*, bk. 4, vv. 970-972.

quë el leur disoit." [my body has become completely annihilated, so that people can hardly see it, but they hear my voice, which pleases them immensely, because of the truth that it speaks to them].[99]

Unlike the Sibyl of the *Ovide Moralisé*, who is strongly implied to be ignored by men because she is no longer beautiful,[100] de Pizan's Sibyl is virtually invisible. People do not avoid looking at her; she is simply so faded that her body is difficult to perceive. Her voice, however, endures and speaks the truth. As Fabienne Pomel argues:

> À cet égard, l'histoire de Phébus et de la Sibylle, telle que la raconte Ovide et qu'elle est rappelée dans le *Chemin de longue étude* fait de la Sibylle l'emblème d'une voix transcendant le temps . . . Cette voix désincarnée, voix de vérité et source de plaisir, transcendant le temps, représente, par-delà la simple renommée, une voix féminine d'autorité émancipée du corps physique.[101]

> [In this regard, the story of Phoebus and the Sibyl, as it is recounted by Ovid and recalled in the *Path of Long Study*, makes the Sibyl an emblem of a voice transcending time . . . This disembodied voice, voice of truth and source of pleasure, transcending time, represents, beyond mere fame, a feminine voice of authority emancipated from the physical body.]

It is this image with which Christine de Pizan identifies. The idea of a truth-teller with an invisible body evokes the the writer of a book, whose physical body cannot be seen by the remote reader, but whose words are nonetheless read and understood. In transforming the Sibyl into a figure for the female author, de Pizan thus draws a parallel between the Sibyl

---

[99] *Chemin*, 586-589.

[100] One could argue that the Sibyl of the *Ovide Moralisé* is also semi-visible, similar to Pizan's Sibyl. The text's intense focus on her unattractive appearance, however, works against this notion. In contrast, although de Pizan's Sibyl has a visible body, she appears exclusively in de Pizan's dream-vision, which suggests a more ambiguous corporeality.

[101] Pomel, "guide et double," paras. 27–28.

and herself.[102] Like the Sibyl, she writes the truth for those who can read it or hear it read, and much as the Sibyl's voice lingers on after the destruction of her body, so, too, does Pizan hope her words will be remembered and influence posterity.[103] That she holds this hope is attested in the *Book of the City of Ladies*, wherein Lady Reason tells the Christine-narrator that the City of Ladies, which Christine will "build" by compiling stories of noble women, will last forever. As she relates: "Si sera ta cité tres belle sans pareille et de perpetuelle duree au monde." [So your city will be beautiful without parallel and last forever on earth].[104] De Pizan goes on to state that this city will accommodate all virtuous women, "les passees dames, comes les presentes et celles a avenir [the women of the past, just like those of the present and those of the future].[105] Thus, her city, immortalized in her writing, will continue to be read by, and offer harbor to, women of the future. In the figure of the Sibyl, one can see Christine de Pizan's desire to have a lasting voice.

Later in de Pizan's biography of the Sibyl, she mentions a final personally resonant account, that of the encounter between the Cumaean Sibyl and Tarquinius Priscus. As the Sibyl relates, in her old age, she: "Portay a Romme .ix. volumes / De livres de loys et coustumes / Et des secrés de Romme, ou temps / Que la gouvernoit par bon sens

---

[102] See Pomel's comment: "Emblème d'une voix transcendante et inspirée, la Sibylle fournit à l'écrivain un modèle pour son écriture et sa représentation." [Emblem of a transcendent and inspired voice, the Sibyl furnishes for the writer a model for her writing and for her representation]. Pomel, para. 7. See also Lechat, *« Dire Par Fiction »*, 452–53.

[103] Pomel further suggests that de Pizan's desire to associate the Sibyl with the disembodied voice of prophecy is connected with her own anxieties about the difficulty for a woman to be heard and recognized in the field of letters. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 28.

[104] Cité, 1.4 pg. 630.

[105] *Cité*, 3.19 p. 1031.

Tarquinius Priscus"[106] ["Carried to Rome nine volumes / Of books of laws and customs /

And secrets of Rome, / in the time that Tarquinius Priscus governed / It with good

sense."].[107] De Pizan's exact source for this story is unknown, as it had a long textual

history. She would certainly have encountered it in Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*

[Concerning Famous Women], one of her known sources, although whether this is the

source she had in mind when relating this aspect of the Sybil's life is unknown.[108]

Regardless of the specific account she derived it from, Pizan's choice to relate this

particular episode in the Sibyl's life is significant. As with her mention of the Sibyl of a guide

to Aeneas, it emphasizes the Sibyl's status as a counsellor to the powerful. In addition, like

her characterization of the Sibyl as a poet, it connects her with the written word, significant

because of Pizan's own career as a writer.[109]

Pizan's choice to explicitly mention the subjects of the books the Sibyl brought to

Tarquinus is also important, as it places an emphasis on their bearer's status as a bearer of

---

[106] *Chemin*, 620-624.

[107] Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 620–24.

[108] Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* was de Pizan's primary source for the first two parts of her *Livre de la cité des dames*. Rosalind Brown-Grant, "Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*," by Christine de Pizan, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xviii. Boccaccio discusses the Cumaean Sibyl in chapter 26 of the *De claris mulieribus*. Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, chap. 26, pp. 50–51.

[109] When discussing Christine de Pizan's depiction of the Cumaean Sibyl in the *Cité des dames*, Kevin Brownlee notes that the Sibyl's role in foretelling the future of Rome to Tarquinius marks her as the more political of the two sibyls de Pizan focuses on in the *Cité*, and highlights the status of the figure of the sibyl as an "authoritative female figure of religious and political prophecy," a role that is "deeply linked to Christine's sense of her literary vocation, and of her identity as a woman in this context." Brownlee, "Structures of Authority," 141–43. See also Pomel's argument that: "Avec les neuf volumes de livres apportés à Tarquin, elle fait figure d'autorité. Ce portrait, subordonné aux préoccupations de Christine, légitime sa fonction de guide dans l'autre monde des livres." Pomel, "guide et double," para. 10.

wisdom and culture, aspects of the Sibyl's characterization in which Pizan could see herself. As she relates, the books that the Sibyl brings to Rome are books of "loys et coustumes / Et des secrés de Romme" ["books of laws and customs / And secrets of Rome"].[110] Thus, they encompass multiple fields of knowledge with clear social, political, and cultural relevance. The Sybil is carrying to Rome the knowledge of how it runs, how its people behave, what they value, and what it is essential that they know.[111] In choosing these topics for the Sybil's books, de Pizan thus draws a parallel to her own work. At the time of her writing of the *Path of Long Study*, Pizan had already written the *Epistre Othea*, a "mirror for princes" that combines political advice (law) with guides for moral behavior (customs).[112] Her interest in works that deliver information on "laws and customs," in addition to the "secrets" of knowledge, would be developed throughout her writing career, in works of social and political education such as the *Livre des Trois Vertus*, the *Livre du corps de policie*, and the *Livre de paix*. Thus, much as the Sybil brings to Rome knowledge that is deeply socially relevant, vital to the political and cultural traditions of an entire country, de Pizan seeks to deliver this variety of knowledge through her writing and to restore stability to her country and to the lives of her readers.[113]

---

[110] *Chemin*, 622-23; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 622-23.

[111] As Solterer argues, "The Cumaean Sibyl embodies the source of law and custom, of all that is most sacred about the originary city. She is responsible for its foundation, and by inference for its ongoing development. Her example thus underscores the critical degree to which the prophetic is bound up with the city's welfare: its language is committed to its equitable rule." Solterer, "Christine's Way," 166.

[112] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Earl Jeffrey Richards, "Introduction to *Othea's Letter to Hector*," by Christine de Pizan, trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Earl Jeffrey Richards (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), 17.

[113] See sources cited in note 7 above on de Pizan's political theories and goals.

Finally, de Pizan's choice to relate this episode draws a parallel between herself and the Sibyl by virtue of what she chooses not to say. Interestingly, when describing the Sibyl's interactions with Tarquinius, de Pizan does not mention that the Sibyl burned any of her books. Instead, she ends the story with their delivery. By virtue of its status as an allusion, this version of the tale evokes the fuller narrative: it is not necessary for Pizan to tell the whole story if the reader has encountered it already. But by virtue of its incompleteness, it adds a layer of meaning to the theme of fragmentation present in the original, suggesting that in order to achieve wisdom and understanding, it may be necessary to make meaning from fragments. Like Tarquinius Priscus, who is forced to derive nine books' worth of information from three, in order to receive the full story, the reader must fill in the blanks in what is written with what she, herself, has heard and read.

Thus, obliquely, by giving a fragmentary account of a narrative about fragmentation, de Pizan presents another similarity between herself and the Sibyl—much as the Sibyl compels Tarquinius to make meaning from fragments, de Pizan both models this process herself and compels her readers to engage in it. Through the figure of the Sibyl, de Pizan puts together pieces of what she has read. And by virtue of its patchwork quality, her work is densely packed with allusions to longer narratives—works of philosophy, history, mythology, natural science, etc. As a result, the reader must either derive a sense of the meaning of the whole texts through the scraps she is given or visit these texts herself and piece together her own meanings from them. In constructing her narrative in this way, Pizan thus acts in a parallel way to the Cumaean Sibyl herself.

One final source for Pizan's Sibyl that I wish to discuss is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, from which Pizan derives important aspects of her mentor's characterization. As with

Boethius, de Pizan appears to identify with Dante and with the trajectory of his narrative

from desolation to consolation and truth. As she does with with Boethius and Lady

Philosophy, she draws from her identification with Dante in crafting a mentor that fulfils

for her some of the needs that the character of Virgil fills for his pupil. But there are also

key differences between Dante's Virgil and the Sibyl, differences that reflect the distinctions

between Christine de Pizan's goals and Dante's own.[114] And these differences reveal a key

aspect of composite reading: the way that it allows one to not merely replicate the

messages of one's source texts, but to make them one's own.

That Christine de Pizan drew inspiration from Dante has been well-documented in

the scholarship.[115] If nothing else, her choice to use a line from Dante's *Inferno* as the title

and central image of her work attests to this influence. But Christine de Pizan also takes

care to make this debt explicit, as well as to highlight parallels between Dante and

---

[114] For a discussion of the significant differences that Christine de Pizan draws between herself and Dante, as well as the similarities, see: Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 211, 217–26; Kevin Brownlee, "Le projet « autobiographique » de Christine de Pizan : histories et fables du moi," in *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 13–16.

[115] For an early (and at times unnecessarily critical) overview of Christine de Pizan's references to Dante and borrowings from his works, see: Arturo Farinelli, *Dante e la Francia: dall'età media al secolo di Voltaire* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1908), 146–92, http://archive.org/details/danteelafranciad00fari. Farinelli incorrectly credits de Pizan with the introduction of Dante to France Farinelli, 151. In actuality, the first French writer to mention him was Philippe de Mézières, although de Pizan has the distinction of being the second. Tarnowski, ed., *Chemin*, 155n3. For an evaluation of de Pizan's direct references to Dante throughout her corpus, see: Earl Jeffrey Richards, "Christine de Pizan and Dante: A Reexamination," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 222, no. 1 (1985): 100–111. For an analysis of Pizan's borrowings from Dante in the *Chemin de longue estude*, and the way she uses references to Dante to build her own authority as a writer, see: Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy"; De Rentiis, "Sequere me." For an overview of Christine de Pizan's borrowings from Dante in the *Chemin*, see: Merkel, "imitazione dantesca." See also: Sylvia Huot, "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante," *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 361–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43802011.

herself.[116] Thus, when Christine learns, from the Sibyl, that the name of the path she stands

on is "Lonc Estude" [Long Study] she directly quotes from Dante's work:

> . . . le nom du plaisant pourpris
> Oncques mais ne me fu appris,
> Fors en tant que bien me recorde
> Que Dant de Florence recorde
> En son livre qu'il composa
> Ou il moult beau stile posa.
> Quant en la silve fu entrez
> Ou tout de pauor ert oultrez,
> Lors que Virgile s'aparu
> A lui dont il fu secouru,
> Adont lui dist par grant estude
> Ce mot: "Vaille moy lonc estude
> Qui m'a fait cercher tes volumes
> Par qui ensemble accointance eumes."[117]

> [The name of this pleasant place[118] was never taught to me, except inasmuch as I
> remember well that Dante of Florence recounts in the book which he composed,
> where he presented a very beautiful style, that when he entered into the wood
> where he was overwhelmed by fear, and Virgil, who helped him, appeared to him, he
> said to him with great zeal the words: "May the long study avail me that made me
> consult your works, by which we have become acquainted."]

Although de Pizan does not depict Christine as reading Dante's *Commedia* before bed, it is

clear from this episode that it is among the works in her mental library.[119] And one can see,

by virtue of the way de Pizan portrays Christine in the *Chemin*, that it is a work with whose

---

[116] For analysis of the ways that Christine de Pizan presents herself as parallel figure to, or a kind of successor of, Dante in the *Chemin*, see: Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy."

[117] *Chemin*, 1125-37.

[118] Pizan's choice of word here, "pourpris," specifically denotes an enclosed space, in particular a walled garden or any sort of yard surrounding a house. Robert Martin, "pourpris, subst. masc.," in *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020), http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/pourpris. The suggestion of walls may indicate the limits placed on her ability to traverse it.

[119] As Kevin Brownlee notes: "This initial reference sets up Christine-protagonist as a reader of Dante." Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 218.

central figure she may have identified.

Like the Cumaean Sibyl, Dante was Italian, an immediate point of similarity with

Christine de Pizan, which she calls attention to by referring to him as "Dant de Florence."[120]

He was also, like de Pizan, a writer, a fact she highlights when describing what he wrote:

"En son livre qu'il composa / Ou il moult beau style posa." [in the book which he composed,

where he presented a very beautiful style].[121] A bit of extratextual sleuthwork uncovers

another parallel between the two: Dante's persona in the *Commedia* is similar in age to

Christine de Pizan was when she wrote the *Chemin*. In the opening of the *Inferno*, Dante's

narrator recounts that he was "Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita" ["In the middle of the

journey of our life"][122] which would make him around thirty-five years old.[123] And

Christine de Pizan, born circa 1364,[124] relates that her dream took place on October 5,

---

[120] *Chemin*, 1128. As Zühlke argues, by being guided by the Italian Sibyl, de Pizan places herself in a lineage of Italian poets: Aeneas is guided by the Sibyl in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Virgil guides Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, and Christine, Italian by birth, is guided by the Sibyl along a path borrowed from Dante. Zühlke, "Christine de Pizan—le 'moi' dans le texte et l'image," 236. See also: Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 217, 226.

[121] *Chemin*, 1129-30.

[122] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1: The Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.1, pp. 26–27.

[123] The age of Dante's persona in the *Commedia* is well-established. In the notes on their edition of the *Inferno*, Ronald Martinez and Robert Durling state that since the poem is set in April of 1300, and Dante is thought to have been born in May 1265, then "he would be thirty-five in 1300, midway in the normative biblical lifespan, 'threescore years and ten' (Psalm 90.10), mentioned by Dante in *Convivio* 4.23." Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, Notes to Canto 1, in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1: Inferno,* by Dante Alighieri, Ed. and Trans. by Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 34n1.

[124] Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan : Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984), 16.

1402,[125] which would make her authorial persona thirty-eight years old, only three years

older than the character of Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

Beyond these basic parallels, de Pizan also emphasizes certain characteristics of

Christine that parallel those she ascribes to Dante or that Dante ascribes to himself.

Prominent among these is her love of learning. When discussing Dante in the *Chemin*, de

Pizan describes him as one "Qui a lonc estude ot la dent"[126] [who greatly desired long

study], calling attention to the "lonc estude" that led him to Virgil.[127] She also takes pains to

establish Christine as one who loves learning. When Christine first encounters the Sibyl, the

Sibyl comments on "l'amour qu'as a scïence" [the love that you have for knowledge],[128] and

she later explains that the Path of Long Study, along which she and Christine walk, is "gardé

pour ceulx/ Qui sont diligens de comprendre / Et se delitent en apprendre" ["reserved for

those / Who are eager to understand / And delight in learning"].[129] Indeed, throughout the

journey along the path, Christine frequently remarks upon the joy and pleasure she

experiences in observing and learning about everything she encounters there. In strongly

emphasizing the joy both Christine and Dante take from learning, de Pizan appears to be

drawing a deliberate parallel between herself and Dante. Indeed, as Bärbel Zühlke argues:

"Christine établit, de façon indirecte, une correspondance entre le caractère de Dante et sa

propre personne. Pareille au poète florentin, qu'elle déclare désireux de savoir (vv. 1141-

---

[125] *Chemin*, 185-87.

[126] De Pizan states, idiomatically, that Dante "had the tooth" for long study, evoking a voracious
appetite for it.

[127] *Chemin*, 1142, 1136.

[128] *Chemin*, 492.

[129] *Chemin*, 940-42; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 940-42.

1142), elle se montre, tout au long de son poème, avide d'apprendre." [Christine

establishes, in an indirect fashion, a correspondence between the character of Dante and

her own self. Like the Florentine poet, whom she declares eager to know, she presents

herself, throughout her poem, as hungry to learn].[130]

Like Dante, too, de Pizan emphasizes that she is grieving for a lost loved one. In the

Commedia, Dante's narrator is tormented by his grief for his beloved Beatrice, mentioning,

through the figure of Saint Lucy, "la pieta del suo pianto" ["the anguish of his weeping"] and

"la morte che 'l combatte / su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto" ["the death that attacks

him there, by the / torrent where the sea has no boast"].[131] Similarly, in the opening of the

Chemin, Christine recounts at length her memories of the happiness she felt with her

husband and her grief at losing him.[132] Although thirteen years have elapsed since his

death, she relates that "mon grief dueil renouvelle / Chacun jour, ne plus ne mains / Que s'il

n'eust que un an ou mains, / Car la grant amour ne laisse" [my heavy sorrow is renewed

each day, no more or less than if it were a year or less, because the great love remains].[133]

Christine's grief is, in many ways, the impetus for her vision, since it is to lessen her sorrow

that she chooses to read the *Consolation of Philosophy*. This parallels the role of Dante's

grief in facilitating his encounter with Virgil, as Beatrice requested that Virgil guide Dante

after hearing news of his grief for her.[134] Thus, both are taken on their journeys in part as a

---

[130] Zühlke, "Christine de Pizan—le 'moi' dans le texte et l'image," 236.

[131] Alighieri, *Inferno*, 2.106-108, 44; Durling, trans., *Inferno*, 2.106-108, p. 45.

[132] *Chemin*, 68-124.

[133] *Chemin*, 129-130, 132-35.

[134] Alighieri, *Inferno*, 2.52-117, pp. 42–47.

result of their mourning.[135]

By including these details, de Pizan hints at her identification with the figure of Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. And much as de Pizan's identification with Boethius led to her borrowing traits of Lady Philosophy in building her Sibyl, so, too, does de Pizan take aspects of Dante's Virgil and apply them to her literary mentor.[136] Her selection of details highlights an important aspect of composite reading: the way that the composites one builds from one's reading can function as a source of knowledge and guidance that can enable one to pursue one's goals and respond to one's present problems.

The bookish nature of the Sibyl as a composite guide derived from reading finds its parallel in Virgil's status as a mentor that Dante first encountered in a book.[137] When he meets Virgil on the path, the Dante-narrator remarks upon the "lungo studio e 'l grande amore / che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume" ["long study and great love . . . that has caused me to search through your volume"].[138] In Dante's own words, then, he marks Virgil as one

---

[135] Both, too, as Farinelli notes, drew inspiration and comfort in their sorrows from Boethius. Farinelli, *Dante e la Francia*, 155.

[136] Many have noted the resemblance between Pizan's Cumaean Sibyl and Dante's Virgil. For further commentary on their similarities, see: Brownlee, "Structures of Authority," 140; Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 212–16, 220; Farinelli, *Dante e la Francia*, 158–59; Merkel, "imitazione dantesca," 198–99; Pomel, "guide et double," para. 24; Brownlee, "Le projet « autobiographique » de Christine de Pizan : histories et fables du moi," 13; De Rentiis, "Sequere me," 40–42.

[137] As Kevin Brownlee observes, Christine de Pisan takes steps to highlight "Dante's self-presentation as a reader of Virgil" by referencing the "beautiful style" of the *Commedia*, which the Dante-protagonist claimed to have learned from Virgil, as well as citing the meeting between the Dante-protagonist and Virgil, in which Dante references the reading that brought them together. Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 218. Brownlee also remarks, however, on the distinction Dante draws between his reading of Virgil and his protagonist's literal encounter with Virgil in the *Commedia*, which contrasts with Christine de Pizan's relationship with Dante, which is "a purely literary, purely readerly one—it 'takes place' in her library." Brownlee, 220.

[138] Alighieri, *Inferno*, 1.83-84, p. 30; Durling, trans., 1.82-84, p. 31.

whom he came to know by reading his works: a teacher from a book who appears in his dream-world to guide him towards consolation, knowledge, and poetic ascension.[139] Similarly, Christine de Pizan's Sibyl is a figure she has encountered in various forms in the works she has read, a figure made of personalized fragments of these works, and a figure who, like Virgil, serves as a teacher, rescuer, symbol of her student's desires, and as an aid in their attainment.[140]

The role of rescuer can be seen in the way that both figures come to save their pupils from their sorrows. In the opening of the *Inferno*, Virgil appears to Dante when he has lost his way, explains to him where he is and what the purpose of his journey is, and guides him safely through another world. Thus, he tells Dante that: : Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno / che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida, / e arrotti di qui per loco etterno" ["for your good I think and judge that you / shall follow me, and I shall be your guide, and I will / lead you from here through an eternal place."][141] Similarly, the Sibyl comes to Christine when she is in distress at her inability to reduce the violence and chaos of the world she lives in, and she guides her through another world where she may find the

---

[139] As Dina de Rentiis argues, "Dans l'*Enfer* et le *Purgatoire*, Dante montre comment son moi-personnage-auteur—c'est-à-dire l'homme, le chrétien, l'écrivain Dante—parvient, en suivant Virgile, à une perfection rhétorique, poétique, morale et philosophique suffisante pour être 'couronné' maître de soi et pour frapper aux portes du ciel." [In the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, Dante displays how his me-character-author—that is to say, the man, the Christian, the writer Dante—achieves a rhetorical, poetic, moral and philosophical perfection sufficient to be crowned "master" of himself and to knock on the doors of heaven]. De Rentiis, "Sequere me," 37.

[140] Pomel, "guide et double," paras. 4, 5, 24, 37. Also See Dina De Rentiis's argument that in modeling her relationship with Sibyl on Dante's relationship with Virgil, which is that of an author following another author, not only does Pizan elevate the Sibyl to the level of an *auteur*, but she also marks herself as one. De Rentiis, "Sequere me," 42.

[141] Alighieri, *Inferno*, 1.112-14, p. 32; Durling, trans., *Inferno*, 1.1120114, p. 33.

answers to her questions.[142] As she states:

> Tu fus en un grant pensement,
> Ou te sembloit et t'iert avis
> Qu'en ce monde divers et vilz
> N'a se pestillence et mal non.
> Mais se veulx suivre mon penon,
> Je te cuid conduire de fait
> En autre monde plus parfaict,
> Ou tu pourras trop plus apprendre
> Que ne peus en cestui comprendre[143]

> [You were deep in thought, where it seemed to you that in this contrary and vile world there is nothing but corruption and misfortune.[144] But if you will follow my pennon, I believe I can lead you to another more perfect world[145] where you can learn much better what you cannot understand in this one.]

Both instructors, then, are deeply responsive to their students' needs, and both provide guidance through an allegorical world where their students are able to learn.

To this end, both mentors are eager to do everything necessary to aid their students in the attainment of personally relevant knowledge, taking pains to explain in detail everything that strikes their students' curiosity. Thus Virgil constantly answers the questions that Dante poses to him, at one point even anticipating his question, saying: "Tu non dimandi / che spiriti son questi she tu vedi? / or vo'che sappi, innanzi che più andi, / ch'ei non peccaro" ["You do not ask what / spirits are these you see? Now I wish you to

---

[142] On this parallel, see Merkel, "imitazione dantesca," 198–99.

[143] *Chemin*, 644-652.

[144] I base my translation here on Tarnowski's rendering of "mal non" as "malheurs," as Pizan's usage seems to be idiomatic. Tarnowski, trans., *Chemin*, p. 127.

[145] "another more perfect world" is the most common translation I have seen of Pizan's phrase. Both Ramke Lardin and Brownlee use it in their own translations. Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning,* 650; Kevin Brownlee, trans., "From *The Path of Long Study*," in *The Collected Works of Christine de Pizan*, by Christine de Pizan, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 68.

know, / before you walk further, / that they did not sin"].[146] Likewise, Pizan relates that she had many questions for the Sibyl, all of which she answered with goodwill: "merveilles plus de mile / Me monstra la sage Sebile, / Et trestout me voult exposer / Quanque voyons, sans reposer" ["more than a thousand marvels / The wise Sybil showed me, / And wanted to explain everything / That we saw to me, without resting"].[147] Drawing from the image of Virgil, then, Christine de Pizan reinforces her figure of a mentor who is responsive to her student's needs.[148]

From Virgil, too, Christine de Pizan derives the idea of a mentor who is not just a means of comfort, but a figure who both reflects and enables her student's ambitions. Virgil, in a number of ways, is an aspirational figure for Dante: an image of a legendary poet to whose status he seeks to attain and surpass.[149] At the same time, as Dante's guide and model, Virgil functions as the practical means by which Dante can attain this status.[150] In the opening of the *Inferno*, the Dante-narrator lauds Virgil as one from whose writing he

---

[146] Alighieri, *Inferno*, 4.31-34, p. 72; Durling, trans., *Inferno*, 4.31-34, p. 73.

[147] *Chemin*, 1285-88; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 1285-88.

[148] As Maria Merkel puts it: "Come Virgilio nella sua Eneide, Cristina prende a guida del suo viaggio la Sibilla, ma questa guida quanti punti di contatto offre con la guida dantesca! | Ella non le addita solo la via, ma le è pure maestra che le spiega tutti i dubbi che si affacciano alla mente di lei ancora incapace." [Like Virgil in his *Aeneid*, Chrisitne takes the Sibyl as guide on her journey, but how many points of contact this guide offers with the Dantean guide! She not only shows her the way, but she is also a teacher who explains to her all the doubts that come to her still incapable mind]. Merkel, "imitazione dantesca," 198.

[149] On Dante's desire to become an "auctor" who surpasses his Virgilian mentor, and the ways in which, in doing so, he figures himself as an "author," see: Albert Russell Ascoli, "From *auctor* to author: Dante before the *Commedia*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46–66.

[150] See: Kevin Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143–47.

drew elements of his own poetic style, thus indicating the role that Virgil as author played

in his ascent as a poet.[151] By marking Virgil as his mentor and as a source of inspiration,

Dante is thus able to legitimize his own poetic activity.[152] Similarly, on the allegorical level,

by guiding Dante through Hell and Purgatory, Virgil supplies him with the knowledge he

needs to write the poetry of politics, of the cosmos, and of political prophecy.[153]

In much the same way, the Sibyl is, for de Pizan, both an emblem of her pupil's

desires and a means for her to achieve them. As a renowned figure of female wisdom who

wrote works that changed the course of history, the Cumaean Sibyl has, as discussed above,

precisely what Christine de Pizan desired for herself. As a figure analogous to both Dante

and Virgil, a wise woman writer in a long line of wise female writers, the Sibyl functions as

a legitimizing predecessor for her student.[154] And as an allegorical figure within the

Chemin, the Sibyl functions as a practical guide who helps Christine discover the

---

[151] Alighieri, Inferno, 1.79-87, p. 30. For a brief analysis of the ways that Dante presents himself as an imitator of Virgil, see: De Rentiis, "Sequere me," 36–39.

[152] See De Rentiis, 36–37. As she argues, "pour Dante (et pas seulement pour lui), au début de XIVe siècle . . . *imiter* un 'auteur' signifie donner, par cette imitation, un sens et une valeur à sa propre œuvre et à soi-même en tant qu'écrivain; d'autre part, désigner un écrivain comme *maître/modèle à suivre/imiter* équivaut à donner un sens et une valeur à cet écrivain et à son œuvre" [for Dante (and not only for him), at the beginning of the XIVth century . . . to *imitate* an "author" means to give, via that imitation, a meaning and a value to one's own work and to oneself as a writer; on the other hand, to designate an author as *master/model to follow/imitate* is equivalent to giving meaning and value to that writer and to his work]. De Rentiis, 36.

[153] As Helen Solterer argues, when the Sibyl transitions from discussing her guidance to Aeneas to discussing her guidance of Christine, this legitimizes de Pizan. and "given the echo of Dante's *Inferno*, this rite of passage signals her complementary ambition to imitate the prophetic example of Italy's first civic poet. The implication is that her work (*estude*) will benefit from the examples of both masters. it will create a language befitting an equitable city—a goal that neither Vergil nor Dante finally accomplished." Solterer, "Christine's Way," 167.

[154] For Christine de Pizan's construction of the Sibyl as an authorizing forbear, see: Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 211–13, 220; Pomel, "guide et double," paras. 24–26; Jeay, "Traversée par le verbe," 14; De Rentiis, "Sequere me."

information she will need in order to write a poem—the *Chemin de lonc estude* itself—that will enable her to intervene in the political turmoil that surrounds her.[155]

Thus, in her borrowings from Dante, Christine de Pizan vividly displays how the production of composite knowledge enables one to derive both wisdom and authority from one's sources. But Christine de Pizan's Sibyl also diverges from Dante's Virgil in a number of key ways, chief among them her fate in the narrative. And in this divergance, one can see a final aspect of the knowledge produced from composite reading: the possibility for it to be personalized to the self.

Virgil, Dante's mentor, is able to guide the Dante-narrator through Hell and out again, all the way to the border between Purgatory and Paradise. But because the historical Virgil was not a Christian, it is impossible for him, in Dante's cosmology, to enter Heaven.[156] Thus, once Virgil has taken the narrator as far as he can go, they separate, and Dante is left in the hands of the sainted Beatrice, poetic muse par excellence, but not a poet herself. As Virgil guides Dante, Christine's Sibyl guides her along the Path of Long Study to the base of the heavens. However, she is also able to ascend with Christine, climbing the ladder of speculation with her and explaining the sights that she sees in the various celestial spheres she passes through.[157] And when their journey is done, the Sibyl walks Christine home, accompanying her back along the path until she is woken up by her mother's knock on her

---

[155] As Dina de Rentiis argues, by following the Sibyl, Christine de Pizan's authorial persona gains the knowledge that allows her to both write her work and to transmit that knowledge to others. De Rentiis, "Sequere me," 41.

[156] Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," 143.

[157] *Chemin*, 1569-2598.

216

betroom door.[158] It is this disjunction between the roles of the Sibyl and Virgil that reveals the different use to which de Pizan is putting her mentor figure than to which Dante is putting his. As a poetic forefather, one who has excelled in the same field that Dante aspires to succeed in, Virgil is both an inspiration and an obstacle that Dante must overcome if he is to claim his own place as a master of poetry. In ascending above him, Dante is, in a way, announcing not just his spiritual but also his poetic ascension above his former mentor.[159]

Christine de Pizan, however, never gestures towards replacing or superseding the Sibyl. As a result of the Sibyl's guidence through the space of her dream, Christine does, it is true, take on a kind of sibylline function herself, gaining visionary knowledge that she can then deliver to her readers, via the medium of her work.[160] Yet the Sibyl continues to exist as a prophet in her own right: the truth of her prophecies is not mitigated or replaced by the truth Pizan speaks in her own writing, just as none of the prophecies of the sibyls who preceded or followed the Cumaean Sibyl make her own prophecies any less true or relevant. Indeed, when referring to the collective of Sibyls that she forms a part of, de Pizan's Sibyl is humble, stating:

> . . . ne le dis pour vent—,
> Combien que eussent esté devant
> .vi. femmes sages si parfaites
> Que par grace de Dieu prophetes
> Furent et du secret haultiesme

---

[158] *Chemin*, 6384-6398.

[159] As Ascoli puts it in his discussion of Dante's conversation with the apostles Peter, James, and John in the *Paradiso*: "Coming long after Virgil's disappearance from the poem (*Purgatorio* 30), the episode shows a 'Dante' who now possesses an authority comparable to that of prophets and apostles, one which descends to him directly from God, and which thus removes him from the taint and contingency of historical, human authorship, taking him far, far beyiond the accomplishments of his avowed 'maestro e autore.'" Ascoli, "From *auctor* to author," 48–49.

[160] See Solterer, "Christine's Way," 166–71; Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice," para. 34.

Parlerent. Et moi la .vii.ᵉ
Fus; .iii. autres puis moy nasquirent,
Prophetisant tant qu'elz vesquirent.
Et toutes .x. prophetisames
De Jhesuchrist . . .[161]

["I say this not to brag—,
Although there had been before
Six wise women so perfect
That by the grace of God prophets
They were and of the greatest secrets
They spoke. And me, I was the seventh;
Three others after me were born,
Prophesying as long as they lived.
And all ten prophesied
Of Jesus Christ . . ."][162]

The Sibyl does not boast of being better than the other Sibyls: all were perfect, and all

together contributed to the body of prophecy on the coming of Christ. Sibyl number seven

was followed by three others, and yet she is no less able to guide Christine on her own

journey towards wisdom.

Thus, in choosing not to have Christine abandon the Sibyl as Dante does Virgil, de

Pizan articulates a different model of literary and intellectual heritage than Dante. Although

she takes from Dante the model of a prophetic literary mentor, de Pizan does not replace

her. Rather, she stands beside her as one of a long line of female intellectuals, all of whom

use their writing to speak truth to those who can read it.[163] This portrayal of a trans-

---

[161] *Chemin*, 521-530.

[162] *Chemin*, 521-530; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 521-530.

[163] For the idea that, in this work, Christine is ultimately inducted into a kind of learnèd community
containing not only men but also the Muses, Wisdom, and the Sibyl, all of whom "fournissent un
modèle d'identifi à Christine dans son cheminement de clergie," [provide a model of identification
for Christine in her clerkly journey] see Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice," para. 29. Dante does, of course,
likewise situate himself among the pagan poets of the past, who accept him among their number.
Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," 144. But in his upward movement, he also leaves them

historical collective of wise women is akin to the vision de Pizan articulates in the *Book of the City of Ladies*: of a space where women of all ranks, classes, and time periods may find refuge, built by a woman out of the stories of the women who came before her.[164] In placing herself not above, but beside her mentor, Christine de Pizan thus expresses the potential for composite reading to allow one to diverge from one's sources, creating instead a wisdom that responds to one's own personal vision and needs.

In analyzing Christine de Pizan's construction of her Sibyl, then, then, one can understand what composite reading, and the knowledge it produces, looks like, as well as get a glimpse into how de Pizan sees it as functioning. From the resemblance of the Sibyl to Lady Philosophy, who combines the authority of the philosophers with a mother's compassion for her child, one can see how composite reading draws from, and leads to the generation of, personalized knowledge. From the various sources Christine de Pizan uses in constructing the Sibyl's biography, one can see how the raw materials of composite reading can be understood as the fragments of one's reading with which one has identified. And in

behind in Limbo, vividly showcasing the"built-in limitations of the highest pagan poetic achievement." Brownlee, 144. Christine, on the other hand, not only remains with the Sibyl, she also, unlike Dante, returns to earth, bringing with her the socially-relevant knowledge she has gathered along the way. Solterer, "Christine's Way," 168. As Solterer puts it: "Whereas Dante's persona rises higher and higher to a point of no return, Christine's returns earthward with the gifts of prophecy, ever mindful of her social responsibility . . . in the end, it is grounded in a worldly, specifically civil enterprise." Solterer, 168. On Christine de Pizan as marking herself as not only a member of, but also a founder of a lineage of women writers, see: Pomel, "guide et double," 24.

[164] For an analysis of the City of Ladies as an egalitarian space of interdependence and cooperation where all women's voices and knowledge are valued, see: Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint, "Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan's *Cité Des Dames*," in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 215–18, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015025281802. On the city's dialectic between solidarity and individuality, see also: Marion Guarinos, "Individualisme et solidarité dans *Le livre des Trois Vertus* de Christine de Pizan," in *Sur le chemin de longue étude… actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, ed. Bernard. Ribémont, Études Christiniennes 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 87–99, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046884956.

the similarities and differences between the Sibyl and Virgil, one can begin to understand what composite reading can do for the reader: providing guidance, teaching lessons, and enabling one to produce knowledge that goes beyond one's sources. It is what the knowledge derived from composite reading allows the reader to *do* that I will analyze in the final section of this chapter.

A Composite Path

As discussed above, the Sibyl can be understood as an allegorical figure of the knowledge synthesized from the processes of composite reading. And by virtue of what the Sibyl enables Christine to accomplish over the course of her journey, one can understand what composite reading offers to the readers who perform it. Throughout Christine's travels in the company of the Sibyl, three key benefits of composite reading become clear. The first is an enhanced ability to make connections between the works one reads. The second is an improvement in one's ability to understand them. And the third and final gift of composite reading is the ability to generate from one's sources a kind of knowledge that is one's own.

All of these benefits, as can be observed, in some way pertain to reading. This is because the path the Sibyl guides Christine along, from which she enables her to derive personalized knowledge, can be understood as a kind of allegorized library.[165] As Sarah Kay

---

[165] See Kevin Brownlee's remark that "Christine's journey is both a figure for, and a composite of, her reading of books." Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 216. Miranda Griffin likewise notes the bookish qualities of the *Chemin*, commenting on how de Pizan's comparison of the path to parchment highlights its bookish quality, as does the Sibyl's instructions to de Pizan to follow her "penon," which could signify a banner or a pen. Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 56. Pomel likewise notes how "Le jeu de mots sur « chemin » et « parchemin » renforce la métaphore livresque." [the play on words between 'path' and 'parchment' reinforces the bookish metaphor]. Pomel, "guide et double," para. 13. As she argues: "En évoquant le chemin « plus que parchemin ouvert », Christine ne laisse plus de doute au lecteur : le voyage que propose la Sibylle et qu'accomplit Christine, c'est

comments, the fact that Christine's reading of Boethius precipitates her vision, coupled

with the large number of literary allusions throughout the work, allows one to read the

Path of Long Study as "a creative rereading of Christine's own library".[166] Indeed, although

the Path is presented as a material road that traverses the real world, it appears to be made

up of material that Christine has encountered in her reading.[167] And in traveling along this

path, Christine can be understood as symbolically "reading" the works that serve as her

sources.[168]

The name of the Path, as mentioned above, comes from Dante's *Inferno*, and this

work can thus be regarded as one of the texts Christine allegorically "reads" by walking

along the Path of Long Study.[169] Other texts find their way into the Path as well, via the

---

un voyage dans l'espace livresque et paradisiaque du savoir." [In evoking the path "more open than parchment," Christine leaves no doubt for the reader: the voyage the Sibyl proposes and Christine accomplishes is a voyage in a bookish and paradisical space of knowledge.] Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice," para. 5.

[166] Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 158. Kay adds that the "Estude" of the *Chemin de longue étude* can be read as more of a place than an activity, connoting the study wherein Pizan does her reading, as well as the place of thought inside her own head. As Kay explains: "Her study, that is, is a place of thought because it is the place where she herself sits, reads, and thinks. The ensuing text is a journey around the mind of a reader who is also a scholar and a woman, with the particular experiences that this conjunction brings." Kay, 158.

[167] As Griffin observes, "the *Chemin* traces a trajectory which emerges from Christine's encounters with classical and contemporary literature, astronomy, geography, and politics." Griffin, "Transforming Fortune," 57. Although his focus in on Chaucer's *House of Fame*, T.S. Miller puts it well: "As an ordinary dreamer assembles a dream out of fragments of everyday life, so the dream visionary assembles the text of the dream vision out of other textual sources, fragments of a literary life." T. S. Miller, "Writing Dreams to Good: Reading as Writing and Writing as Reading in Chaucer's Dream Visions," *Style* 45, no. 3 (2011): 535, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.45.3.528.

[168] For a reading of Christine's journey as an allegory of reading, see: Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice," para. 9.

[169] See Brownlee: "For Christine, her *long estude* of Dante (among others) not only precedes the journey recounted in the *Chemin*, it also constitutes that journey, which is an extended trope for

sights that Christine sees along the way. Early in her journey, for example, Christine relates

seeing Mount Parnassus, and beholding there the Fountain of Knowledge. Within this

Fountain bathe the nine Muses, and about the mountain's peak flies Pegasus, the stroke of

whose hoof created the Fountain itself.[170] Both Muses and Pegasus are likely borrowings

from de Pizan's reading of Ovid and other classical authors, and by including these details,

she marks this first sight on the journey as a place that is fundamentally literary in

nature.[171]

The bookish quality of the fountain is likewise highlighted by its history. For when

explaining to Christine what the fountain is, the Sibyl mentions the names of those

philosophers, scholars, writers, and poets who frequented the fountain in the past. Thus

she describes Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Democritus, Diogenes, Empedocles, Seneca, Cicero,

Ptolemy, and Avicenna.[172] She also takes care to mention poets such as Virgil, Homer, Ovid,

and Horace, all figures with whom de Pizan would have become familiar through her

reading.[173] She mentions the legendary figures such as Cadmus, Philosophy, and Pallas,

who likewise visited the fountain.[174] And she even describes Christine de Pizan's own

---

Christine's reading of, and profound familiarity with, the *auctores*." Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 220.

[170] *Chemin*, 989-1002.

[171] See Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 158–59.

[172] *Chemin*, 1026-40.

[173] *Chemin*, 1061-65.

[174] *Chemin*, 1075, 1093-94.

father, a more personal, although less literary visitor to the school of the Muses.[175] All of these figures, whether the writers of works aor the figures described in them, are depicted as having drunk from the fountain of Wisdom. The Fountain can thus be understood as a place that links together a variety of different authors, a sort of visual manifestation of a common thread of wisdom that joins their works and their philosophies.[176] And by leading Christine to this place, and explaining its history, the Sibyl not only allows Christine de Pizan to understand the connections between their works but to understand how they relate to her, herself.

Indeed, before the Sibyl explains the Fountain to Christine, she can only look at it with wonder, unable to understand where she is or what the sights that she is seeing mean. All she knows is that they fill her with a profound desire to learn more.[177] It is the Sibyl who explains to her that the Path she stands on is Long Study, that the Fountain she sees is the source of all wisdom, and that the women bathing therein are embodiments of art, poetry, and knowledge.[178] Before the Sibyl tells her, Christine is likewise unaware of the place's history. All of the men who visited it before her are gone: only their legacy remains. But

[175] Farinelli regards Dante's *Commedia* as de Pizan's principal source for this list of notable figures, as does Kevin Brownlee. Farinelli, *Dante e la Francia*, 163; Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 216. See also Merkel, "imitazione dantesca," 203. However, de Pizan also makes key modifications to the list and puts the philosophers before the poets, as well as adding her own father to the list. Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 216.

[176] See Kay's argument that: "Thefountain, then, is a kind of alfresco transformation of Christine's study, where the authors she has read congregate around her and the books themselves make up the landscape." Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 159.

[177] *Chemin*, 855-56.

[178] On de Pizan's choice to make her Muses poetic as well as philosophical Muses, see: Julia Simms Holderness, "Christine et Ses « beuves » : Sens et Portée de Quelques Assimilations Abusives," in *Au Champ Des Escriptures: IIIe Colloque International Sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 Juillet 1998*, ed. Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 149–54; and Green, "Philosophy and Metaphor," 125–27.

they are present in the memory of the Sibyl, who can call them to the mind of her listener. And by calling them together, the Sibyl makes it clear what connects them: the Fountain of Wisdom itself, whose significance Christine is newly able to understand. In essence, it is the Sibyl, the composite produced from Christine de Pizan's reading, who makes the Fountain, and all it represents, legible to Christine.

I read this moment, then, as a representation of the kind of knowledge one can gain from composite reading: knowledge not just of things but of the connections between them. On its own, the fountain of Wisdom is an abstraction, the Muses an embodiment of pure concepts with little reference to the particularities of human life. On their own, each poet, each philosopher, is isolated from the others: a great name living in a series of great works, fragmented, quoted, translated, reinterpreted. But with the mediation of the Sibyl, Christine de Pizan is able to put them together: the philosophers, the fountain, the Muses, and in the person of her father, the way they relate to her own life. Suddenly, things make sense: Wisdom becomes conceivable because she can understand how it is manifested in the works of the authors she has read. The works of the authors become coherent because she can perceive the common drops of wisdom within them. And once the Sibyl has explained these things to her, she tells Christine how she may partake of this wisdom herself—how she may drink of the fountain and generate a kind of personalized knowledge.

Indeed, after the Sibyl tells Christine about many of the individuals who have visited the Fountain in the past, she relates that: "Mais s'estre de si haulte escole / Ne peus, tout au mains a seaulz / Puiseras dedens les ruisseaulx; Se t'i baigneras a ton ayse, / A qui qu'il plaise ou a qui poyse" [But if you cannot be part of this lofty school, at least with a bucket you may take from within the streams; you may bathe there at your ease, whether anyone

likes it or not].[179] Composite reading thus gives Christine both the ability to recognize

wisdom when she sees it and the ability to draw from it herself. In taking a bucket of water

from the stream, she drinks of wisdom as others have before her, but the result is

knowledge that is, if limited by her own limitations—eminently, defiantly her own.

It is this composite knoweldge, embodied by the Sibyl, that helps Christine make

sense of her subsequent reading, enabling her both to better understand the things she

reads and to pinpoint what in her reading is relevant to her. These benefits can be seen

when Christine and the Sibyl leave the Fountain for a trip around the world: the world as it

is represented to Christine through the mediation of the books she has read. Indeed, the

Sibyl takes Christine to places the historical Christine de Pizan never saw, following an

itinerary that closely parallels that of John Mandeville in his *Travels*.[180] And as Christine

walks along Mandeville's route with the Sibyl, Christine de Pizan dramatizes the process of

a reader being guided through a book by the things she has put together from her previous

reading.[181] Thus, Christine begins at Constantinople, and travels from thence to a variety of

---

[179] *Chemin*, 1084-88.

[180] Paget Toynbee comments extensively on Pizan's debt to Mandeville in his 1892 article "Christine de Pizan and Sir John Maundeville," noting that Pizan not only derives material from Mandeville, but even copies his mistakes. Paget Toynbee, "Christine de Pisan and Sir John Maundeville," *Romania* 21, no. 82 (1892): 229, https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.1892.5718. Farinelli also briefly mentions the influence of Mandeville's work on de Pizan. Farinelli, *Dante e la Francia*, 170. As Bernard Ribémont argues, the sense of the "real" in the *Chemin* is a "réel livresque": a "bookish reality," that she derived from various source-works rather than her own travels. Ribémont, "Christine de Pizan : entre espace scientifique et espace imaginé (*Le Livre du Chemin de long estude*)," 251.

[181] As Pomel argues:

> Christine s'apparente au voyageur en chambre qu'est Jean de Mandeville, dont on a d'ailleurs observé l'influence dans son texte. Mais là où Jean de Mandeville use de ses lectures pour donner l'illusion d'un voyage accompli, Christine présente à travers le voyage une allégorie de la lecture. Le parcours qu'elle décrit vers l'Orient puis dans les sphères

locations described in Mandeville's text, including Troy, Cairo, Babylon, Mt. Sinai, Cathay, and India.[182] And the Sibyl is the one who leads her from place to place, explaining everything they see along their journey.[183] While Christine is able to explore each location herself to a certain degree, she mentions multiple times that the Sibyl is the one who is showing or pointing out to her various sights: "Toutes ces choses me monstra / La dame qui m'aministra" ["The lady who led me / Showed me all of these things"], "merveilles plus de mile / Me monstra la sage Sebile, / Et trestout me voult exposer / Quanque voyons, sans reposer" ["more than a thousand marvels / The wise Sybil showed me, / And wanted to explain everything / That we saw to me, without resting"], and "celle toudis me aprenoit / Les noms des lieux par ou j'aloye / Et m'exposoit quanque vouloye" ["still she taught me / The names of the places where I went / And explained to me whatever I wanted"].[184] Thus, although Christine is able to see all of the sights along the way, the Sibyl is the one who

---

célestes, s'apparente à un programme de lectures dans les domaines géographique, religieux, cosmographique et astrologique, tandis que le débat entre les quatre reines (Noblesse, Chevalerie, Richesse et Sagesse), arbitré par Raison . . . met en œuvre des lectures dans les domaines politique et éthique. Pomel, "S'écrire en lectrice," para. 9.

[Christine is akin to the armchair traveller John Mandeville, whose influence has been observed in her text. But where John Mandeville uses his reading to give the illusion of a completed journey, Christine presents, through her journey, an allegory of reading. The journey she describes to the East and then to the celestial spheres is like a course of reading in the geographic, religious, cosmographic, and astrological fields, while the debate between the four queens (Nobility, Chivalry, Wealth, and Wisdom), arbitrated by Reason . . . implements readings in the fields of politics and ethics].

[182] Toynbee, "Christine de Pisan and Sir John Maundeville," 230–34. Toynbee compares de Pizan's descriptions of the locations she visits with those Mandeville visits, remarking that "nearly every important circumstance that Christine mentions in this particular portion of her poem, is recorded, often in almost identical terms, in Maundeville's book." Toynbee, 228.

[183] *Chemin*, 1186-88.

[184] *Chemin*, 1233-34, 1285-88, 1364-66; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 1233-34, 1285-88, 1364-66.

draws her attention to objects of interest and makes them legible. As Christine relates:

> Car Sebille me fist savoir
> Les natures de toutes plantes.
> Ainsi com nous marchion des plantes,
> M'aloit devisant les natures
> De toutes mortieulx creatures
> Et de toute de chose insensible,
> Në il n'est riens que homme sensible
> Peust ymaginer ne comprendre, /
> Qu'elle ne mait peine a m'apprendre;
> Et les proprietez disoit
> De tout quanque elle devisoit.[185]

> ["For Sybil made me understand
> The nature of all the plants.
> As we walked among the plants,
> She gave me lessons on the natures
> Of all mortal creatures
> And of all inanimate things,
> There is nothing that rational man
> Cannot imagine or comprehend,
> That she did not take pains to teach me;
> And she explained the properties
> Of all that she described"][186]

By looking at the sights along the way, Christine is "reading" Mandeville, and possibly other travel writers and writers of natural history.[187] But the Sibyl is the one who both shows her what is relevant in them and allows her to understand them. Composite reading, then, allows one to build a base of knowledge that allows one both to make sense of what one reads and to direct one's attention more easily to what is relevant to one's needs.

---

[185] *Chemin*, 1500-10.

[186] Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 1500-10.

[187] For other possible sources of Christine de Pizan's description of her journey, see: Charity Cannon Willard, "Une source oubliée du voyage imaginaire de Christine de Pizan," in *Et c'est la fin pour quoy sommes ensemble: hommage à Jean Dufournet, professeur à la Sorbonne Nouvelle: littérature, histoire et langue du Moyen Âge*, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly et al., vol. 1, 3 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1993), 321–26.

Indeed, the knowledge that Christine gains is not simply knowledge of the things the Sibyl wishes to show her. Rather, what the Sibyl helps her to understand is what Christine herself most wishes to know. While the Sibyl dertermines the course that they take, and desires to show Christine certain things and lead her certain places,[188] she also attends to Christine's own needs and interests. Thus, perceiving Christine's desire to go to Jerusalem, she promptly takes her there.[189] Later, Christine relates that:

> Ou je beoie, alames droit,
> Et ancor vouloye viseter
> Le lieu ou il couvient monter,
> Ou la vierge est tres honoree
> Sainte Katherine aouree;
> Car g'i os ma devocion
> Et pour ycelle entencion
> Sebille vers ce lieu m'avoye[190]
>
> ["We went straight where I so desired,
> And still wanted to visit
> The place where you must climb,
> Where the virgin Saint Catherine
> Is greatly venerated and adored;
> For, I owed my devotion there,
> And for this intention
> Sybil led me towards this place."][191]

The Sibyl guides Christine in the direction of what she wishes to see, helping her learn the things from the text that she most desires to learn. In essence, what the Sibyl is doing is helping Christine gather, from the various snippets of geography, natural history, and

---

[188] For example, de Pizan relates that "nostre chemin atournasmes / Vers Orient, sicomme il plot / A celle qui prist le complot; / Car la me vouldra el mener" [our path turned towards the Orient, as it pleased the one who made the accord, because she wanted to guide me there]. *Chemin*, 1354-57.

[189] *Chemin*, 1240-47.

[190] *Chemin*, 1304-1311.

[191] Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 1304-1311.

legend, both the pieces that interest her the most and a sense of how they fit into a broader world. And from these pieces, Christine will be able to move beyond what she reads, developing a composite knowledge that is her own.

The role of composite reading in allowing one to achieve this knowledge can be vividly seen in the way that the Sibyl guides Christine beyond the texts she reads towards the higher realms of thought. For composite reading does not simply allow one to take in the literal meaning of the texts one reads, but to synthesize and find answers from them. Thus, once Christine and the Sibyl reach the end of the Path of Long Study, the Sibyl calls up to the heavens and asks Ymaginacion [Imagination] to throw down the ladder of Speculacion [Speculation] so that they may ascend to the heaven of air, where dwell the forces that govern the destinies of mankind, and where Christine may attend the court of Reason.[192] It is significant that the Sibyl is the one who grants Christine access to both imagination and speculation. In attending to the parts of texts with which she identifies, represented by the Sibyl, Christine is able to look beyond what is strictly printed on the page, contemplate it, and draw personally relevant conclusions from it. She is able to imagine herself among the heavens, where she is able to view the "Influences" and "Destinees" that govern the fates of individuals and of the world, the very fates in which Christine seeks to intervene through her writing.[193] And, because the Sibyl explains what she sees to her, she is able to watch these figures of destiny at work and understand what is to come.[194] Christine's encounter with the Destinies and Influences displays vividly the way

---

[192] *Chemin*, 1574-1649; 2060-2614.

[193] *Chemin*, 2111.

[194] *Chemin*, 2164-71.

that composite reading enables one gain insight into the problems that plague oneself. By watching the forces that shape the world, she can ideally understand what she can do to change it. And it is what Christine does in response to what she sees there that suggests, albeit in an incomplete form, the true promise of composite reading: the ability to work both through and against the explicit messages of one's source texts in order to generate a contextually relevant knowledge that offers both personal and political agency. It is this kind of knowledge that she invites her readers to construct for themselves.

The encounter between Christine's composite reading and the monolithic messages of individual literary works can be seen in the Boethian framework de Pizan uses to describe the actions of the Destinies and Influences on the world. Although Christine has taken this journey to the heavens in response to a kind of dissatisfaction with the lessons of Boethius's work, even here, she is somewhat constrained by Boethian philosophy, as her vision is still facilitated and structured by the insights she has gained from her reading of Boethius. Thus, after the manner of Boethius, she relates that the Influences and Destinies, in ordaining the fates of men, act in concert with the will of God, who is above them.[195] And much as she does at the start of her vision, when she contemplates the troubles of the world and concludes, incompletely and temporarily, that there is no solution for them, Chrisitne relates that while she is watching the Influences and Destinies:

> La vi, bien m'en doit souvenir,
> Les ordenements qu'ilz faisoient,
> Dont les aucuns me desplaisoient
> Jusqu'au plourer; et se peüsse,
> Voulentiers leurs cours desmeüsse
> D'aucun cas et de certain lieu,

---

[195] *Chemin*, 2110-41. For Boethius's articulation of Fate as the enactment of God's Providence, at times administered by spirits in service of Providence, see: Boethius, *Consolation*, bk. 4, prose 6, pp. 86–92.

Mais qu'il n'en deust desplaire a Dieu;
Mais destourber ne poz leurs erres.[196]

["I saw there, I remember it well,
The ordinances they made,
 Some of which dismayed,
And made me cry; and if I could
Change their course, willingly I would
 In some cases and certain places,
If it would not upset God;
But I cannot turn them from their course."][197]

Once again, Christine expresses her longing to change the world, and once again she

expresses the futility of her hopes.

Once again, however, she persists in contemplating possible solutions, refusing to be

confined by Boethian stoicism regarding the operations of fate. Though she may not be able

to act directly on the forces of destiny, she nonetheless seeks answers by reflecting on

fragments of a multitude of texts she has read, as dramatized by her attendance at the court

of "Raison" [Reason], where Reason, petitioned by the Earth to find a solution to the

problems plaguing her, calls a council of four "Influences": "Richeche" [Wealth], "Noblece"

[Nobility], "Chevalerie" [Chivalry], and "Sagece" [Wisdom] to determine how to fix the

world.[198] This council takes the form of a vast debate, spanning more than half of the lines

of the work, in which each Influence defends herself from the accusation that she is

responsible for the turmoil of the world and puts forth suggestions for how to fix it.[199]

Much as de Pizan constructs the Sibyl from a variety of sources, so, too, does she structure

[196] *Chemin*, 2142-49.

[197] Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 2142-49.

[198] *Chemin*, 2589-2860.

[199] *Chemin*, 2599-6108.

the debate as a variety of sources, as its participants, Wisdom in particular, all reference

multiple works in support of their claims.[200] In this compilation of textual fragments, then,

ideally lies the answer to a question that a single work, Boethius's *Consolation*, cannot

resolve in a way that de Pizan finds satisfactory. In this debate lies the promise of a

composite knowledge, accessed through the texts one reads, that can allow one to move

beyond them.

The results of this council, however, are mixed: after each Influence presents her

position and evidence to support it, the court resolves that in order to bring the world in

order, it needs somebody to rule it.[201] Each figure advances a candidate and provides

arguments for why her choice would be the best person to rule the world. However, the

court is ultimately unable to come to a conclusion, resolving instead to allow a human court

(specifically, the French court) to decide on who should be the best ruler.[202]

It might seem that this impasse displays the limits of de Pizan's reading method:

although it has provided her narrator with access to a vast range of knowledge, from

earthly to cosmic, and a start towards solving her problems, it has only given her a partial

solution. However, it has given her the pieces necessary to come to a full one. While she

does not have access to all the wisdom of the universe, she has access to quite a bit of it, via

the insights she has collected during her reading and her observation of the divine debate.

While she does not yet know how to resolve the woes of the world, she has seen and

understood them better than would have been possible had she not embarked upon the

---

[200] See Kay, "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain," 167.

[201] *Chemin*, 3041-46.

[202] *Chemin*, 6239-68, 6330-6352.

path of Long Study or followed the guidance of the Sibyl. While listening to Wisdom present her case for how to fix the world does not give Chrisitine an answer to all of her questions, it gives her access to wisdom that is deeply relevant to the various social and political problems that concern her and the people around her at the moment of her reading. And not only does she gain the raw materials she needs to answer her questions, she gains, through her reading, knowledge that is of deep social utility to others, provided that she can present it to them in her writing and enable them to internalize it.[203]

It is here, as in many places in the text, that the fiction that de Pizan has created blends with the reality of the situation. Christine is identified as the text's fictional amanuensis. But her goals parallel the goals of the real Christine de Pizan, who did present her text to real-world readers: a text filled with the urgent, socially-relevant knowledge she had gathered from her own reading.[204] It was a text that could aid them in internalizing this knoweldge by functioning as both a guide to reading and a work to practice on. And it was a text in which they could find everything they needed to know in order to find the answers to the questions she posed to them. In refusing to provide her readers with the answers

---

[203] For an analysis of the relationship between Christine de Pizan's display of knowledge-gathering over the course of the work and her social goals, see: Solterer, "Christine's Way," 171–74. As Solterer argues, what de Pizan presents in this work is a kind of "sapiential writing" with potential social benefit. As Christine de Pizan gathers the knowledge to write her work, she becomes more equipped to play a political role, and in presenting her wisdom to others, she performs a kind of "civic virtue." As she puts it: "Christine's obviously pleasurable erudition is no self-engrossing affair. it develops in accordance with its socual utility . . . For Christine, the study of all books is a measure of her ethical and political responsibilities. The process of working through such learning equips her for a civic role. In fact, it commits her to that role all the more strongly." Solterer, 171–72. On Christine's journey along the Path of Long Study as qualifying her to dispense political advice, see also: Walters, "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom," 230, 235.

[204] As evidenced by the manuscript record, Christine de Pizan did, in fact, distribute copies of her work to various French dukes, as well as to Queen Isabeau, although we do not know for sure if any of the existing manuscripts found its way into the hands of Charles VI. Ouy, Reno, and Villela-Petit, *Album Christine de Pizan*, 317–43, 379–412.

herself, de Pizan is not faulting her method of composite reading. Rather, she is giving her readers the opportunity to practice her methods themselves, constructing their own figures of sibylline insight to guide them towards knowledge. Through her construction of the Sibyl, and her narration of Christine's journey along the path, de Pizan provides a handbook to composite reading, and the debate between the allegorical figures becomes a source text that readers can use to practice their skills.

For de Pizan does not only explicitly invoke her readers to resolve the debate: after implicitly teaching them the methods by which they may participate in it, she pushes them to apply these methods to their own reading of her text. She does this, in part, by removing herself as a character right when the debate begins. Indeed, Christine appears to vanish during most of the latter portion of the text, relating the entire debate of the allegorical figures without once conveying her personal reactions to their words. This stands in stark contrast to the frequency with which she relates her reactions to her reading, to the Sibyl, and to the sights she sees along the Path of Long Study in the first half of the text. As Andrea Tarnowski comments, once Christine reaches the heavens, for the next several thousand verses, "She becomes a spectator at a celestial debate, no longer the protagonist-voyager but now an unobtrusive witness. The reader does not, and indeed, cannot pay attention to her; she has no role to play."[205] The overtly personal elements of the text disappear here as well, as Tarnowski notes: "for most of the poem, the author focuses the reader's attention

---

[205] Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," 188. See also Kevin Brownlee's observation that "During the debate sequence, the first-person narrator virtually disappears from the story line, becoming no more than a 'window' through which the reader experiences the long speeches of the various allegorical characters." Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy," 210.

on a situation that has no intrinsic connection with Christine's destiny."[206] After framing

the work as her personal journey towards wisdom, once she gains access to this wisdom,

she essentially disappears from the narrative.

De Pizan's choice to step back from the narrative here is an important one. For by

removing her personal experience from the text at a critical moment, de Pizan is inviting

her readers to substitute their own. In the lead-up to the celestial debate, Pizan shows

clearly how her own practice of composite reading, represented by Christine and the Sibyl's

journey through the text, has guided her to a place where she can access the wisdom

necessary to answer her questions. Instead of giving the answer to her readers, however,

she gives them the material they need to find the answers themselves.[207]Rather than

identifying with de Pizan identifying with texts, they are given an opportunity to read, via

the argumentation of the allegorical figures, what a wide variety of authors have to say on

the topics of wisdom and governance, to identify directly with these texts if they can, and to

draw their own conclusions based on what resonates with them.

Coming after de Pizan hands the reigns over to the readers, the debate thus

functions as a kind of anthology they can consult in order to understand the terms of the

argument, the stakes of the question, and what materials they can use to answer the

question. Indeed, all of the Influences allude to and/or provide excerpts from various

---

[206] Tarnowski, "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*," 188.

[207] As Roberta Krueger notes: "The book appeals to the moral judgement of the *reader* to choose among nobility, riches, chivalry, or wisdom as the quality most important for the king. The *Chemin*'s pedagogic strategy is thus interactive rather than prescriptive." Roberta Krueger, "Christine's Anxious Lessons: Gender, Morality, and the Social Order from the *Enseignemens* to the *Avision*," in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 23.

sources to support their choice of ruler and explain why their choice is valid.[208] Nobility

claims to have "Experience" and "droit commun et droit civil" ["common and civil law"] on

her side,[209] and she supports her arguments with references to historical and legendary

rulers such as Alexander the Great, Aeneas, Romulus and Remus, and Brutus of Troy[210] as

well as more contemporary rulers such as Joanna of Naples, the Duke of Anjou, the Duke of

Orleans, and Philip, Duke of Burgundy.[211] Chivalry cites examples of great conquerors and

leaders of armies, such as Ninus, Semiramis, Cyrus the Great, and Scipio Africanus, as well

as the Trojans and the Romans.[212] And Wealth, although she mentions fewer names than

the others, nonetheless maintains that the rulers and conquerors cited by Nobility and

Chivalry would have done nothing without the desire for riches, and that if men such as

Aristotle, Alexander, and Hector had been poor, they would never have been taken

seriously or treated with any honor.[213]

The figure who provides the most textual sources, however, and who speaks for

much longer than the other Influences, is Lady Wisdom.[214] This is partly because her goal is

---

[208] In Helen Solterer's estimation, this "remarkable array of citation and commentary" in effect "turns the *Chemin* into a model *florilegium* that could rival any clerical anthology of the day." Solterer, "Christine's Way," 171.

[209] *Chemin*, 3484-85; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 3485.

[210] *Chemin*, 3542, 3551, 3581, 3629.

[211] *Chemin*, 3657, 3670, 3677-78, 3697.

[212] *Chemin*, 3767, 3770, 3783, 3815, 3791, 3801.

[213] *Chemin*, 3859-3926, 3972-81.

[214] See Tarnowski, "Pallas Athena," 155–56. As Tarnowski notes, even though the winner of the debate is never established, Christine de Pizan's sympathies are clearly with Wisdom. Among the evidence for this, she comments wryly, is the fact that, in traditional iconographic fashion, Wisdom

not merely to advance her own candidate but to educate the other Influences on how they have misconceived their roles.[215] In order to achieve this goal, she not only cites significantly more sources than the other influences, but she prioritizes explicitly literary sources, quoting and paraphrasing the works of various authors and citing, in many cases, the titles or descriptions of the books where she found this information.[216] Thus she mentions what "dit Böece en son tiers *Livre / De Consolacion*" ["Boethius says in the third / Book of his *Consolation*"], what "nous dit Valere en son tiers livre" ["Valerius tells us in his third book"], "que recite le livre / De *Pollicratique*" ["what the book / Of *Policraticus* recounts"], what "Saint Augustin a ce propos / Si dit ou livre de prepos / De Nostre Seigneur" ["On this topic Saint Augustine / Said in the book on the words / Of Our Lord"], what "Egesippus dit en ses recors" ["Hegesippus said in his memoirs"], and what "Jhesus Crist dit / En l'Euvangille" ["Jesus Christ says / In the gospel"], among a multitude of other sources.[217]And she does not simply mention the names of these writers to lend authority to her arguments: she excerpts and summarizes their works so that the readers of the *Chemin* may understand how she is supporting the claims she is making. As a result, readers are

is holding books in her hands, and: "Au goût de Christine, c'est le meilleur attribute possible." [To Christine's taste, this is the best attribute possible] Tarnowski, 155–56.

[215] *Chemin*, 4109-4116, 4227-4236, 4585-8.

[216] The result of this is that readers can not only learn from de Pizan's quoted excerpts, but also locate the sources. Indeed, in analyzing Christine de Pizan's general use and citation of her sources, Sarah Delale observes: "Le travail de l'écrivain correspond à celui de tout lecteur, il transcrit une lecture, donc une sélection. Christine renvoie parfois à la source où la matiere figure dans son intégralité, afin que le lecteur complète éventuellement cette connaissance fragmentaire"[the work of the writer corresponds to that of the reader, it transcribes a reading, therefore a selection. Christine sometimes refers to the source where the matter appears in its entirety, so that the reader can potentially complete this fragmentary knowledge]. Delale, "Matière à nouvelles lectures : l'imaginaire de la composition littéraire chez Christine de Pizan," 638.

[217] *Chemin*, 4125-26, 4335, 4268-69, 4425-77, 4474, 4607-4608; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 4125-26, 4335, 4268-69, 4425-27, 4474, 4607-4608.

not obligated to take Wisdom at her word: they may draw their own conclusions based on

their reading of the authors whose works she excerpts. Indeed, it is vital that they do so.

For as de Pizan makes clear, simply putting the fragments side by side in a single space, as

Wisdom does in her debate, is not enough. Even Reason, simply observing all of the

fragments, is not able to come to a conclusion. In order to make meaning from them,

readers must locate the fragments with which they identify, engage with them, ask

questions, form connections, and then use these connections to synthesize new knowledge.

A feature of Wisdom's speech that facilitates readers' ability to connect with these

fragments is the fact that she will often provide examples from the works of multiple

authors to support a single point. Thus, to argue that a good knight is virtuous, she gives

examples from Valerius, John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, Suetonius, Vegetius, and

Augustine.[218] One source alone, might have sufficed to make her point, but de Pizan

includes multiple variations on the same argument, citing sources that provide different

explanations or give different examples of why Wisdom's arguments are correct. In

providing such a wide variety of subtly different textual fragments to her readers, de Pizan

more effectively enables them to identify with the points that Wisdom is making. The

example Valerius gives of Scipio's decision to prevent his soldiers from bringing prostitutes

to the battlefield might not persuade one reader of the necessity of restraining one's sexual

appetites, but Pompeius's comparison of good knights to wild animals that peacefully graze

together in a grassy field may well impress upon the reader the value of governing one's

appetite so that all may have enough to eat.[219] Much as de Pizan makes the advice she gives

---

[218] *Chemin*, 4354-4378, 4379-4390, 4391-4409, 4410-4424, 4425-4434.

[219] *Chemin*, 4361-78, 4400-4406.

238

in the *Trois vertus* accessible to a variety of women by providing examples of various

different women's lives, so, too, does she make Wisdom's doctrine accessible to a variety of

readers by giving various textual examples. Even if they cannot identify with one, there is

likely another with which they can. Any reader who is able to follow de Pizan's model and

put together the pieces can discover (or create) the wisdom to help make the world

better.[220]

Indeed, de Pizan makes it clear that anyone who reads the work will have all of the

material they need in order to understand the debate: for when she shows her transcript of

the debate to Lady Reason in order to inquire if it lacks anything, Reason assures her "Qu'il

n'y avoit riens a redire, / Et moult s'en tint pour bien contempt" ["That there was nothing

to retell / And that she felt very content with it"].[221] Although not noble herself, de Pizan is

able, through synthesis of her fragmentary reading, to claim political agency and present an

argument to those in power. And in making Wisdom's words open to her readers, she

extends this possibility to them.[222]

De Pizan's theory of reading as necessary fragmentary thus produces writing that is

productively fragmentable: writing in which each piece grants the reader something of

---

[220] In outlining Christine de Pizan's goals in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, Nadia Margolis makes a point that resonates with Christine de Pizan's goals in the *Chemin* as well: "She is seeking knowledge about herself and her world and how to remedy the evils of her time—undeniably a humanist perspective. As a writer, she wants to help her readers to do the same for themselves, in keeping with her notion of the author's moral responsibility toward the public." Nadia Margolis, "Christine De Pizan: The Poetess as Historian," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 3 (1986): 368, https://doi.org/10.2307/2709658.

[221] *Chemin*, 6368-69; Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 6368-69.

[222] The intended readers were, of course, the French nobility. But the system of reading Christine de Pizan outlines in the work could, in theory, be valuable not simply for the nobility but for any reader.

239

value to add to her own personal codex, whether or not she can identify with the whole.[223]

In providing her readers with compilations such as the *Livre de la cité des dames*, the *Epistre Othea*, and the *Chemin de lonc estude* itself, she is providing them with the fragments they need to answer not just the questions she poses to them but questions of their own. She is also modeling the process of knowledge-formation that she espouses in her works: in assembling the fragments for herself by writing her composite texts, she can also show others how to put them together. And in showing how a reader can piece together meaning even from works that are not written for her, de Pizan opens the possibilities of literary analysis to a wider range of readers. It is thus that, in the *Chemin de lonc estude*, de Pizan both elaborates upon the methods by which one may compile one's fragmentary moments of textual identification into a synthesis that grants one access to wisdom, and grants her readers access to that wisdom in their own reading lives. In doing so, she, herself becomes akin to the Cumaean Sibyl, a figure who guides the willing along their personal paths of long study.

---

[223] In her analysis of the way Christine de Pizan breaks her biography of Charles V into short, exemplum-like episodes, Claire le Ninan makes a similar point, commenting on how these brief episodes are designed to be excerpted and repeated in other works. In structuring her work in this way, "l'écrivain assure la transmission de son œuvre grâce à la forme malléable, sécable en petites unités, qu'elle lui a donnée." [The writer ensures the transmission of her work, thanks to the malleable form, breakable into small units, that she gave it]. Claire Le Ninan, "Portraits de l'écrivain en clergesse dans quelques œuvres politiques de Christine de Pizan," *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes. Journal of medieval and humanistic studies*, no. 23 (June 30, 2012): 249–50, https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.12836.

Chapter 4

Reaching Recalcitrant Readers: Strategies of Textual Interpretation in the

Canterbury Tales

Throughout her body of work, Christine de Pizan displays a profound interest in opening

didactic doors for women: helping them gain access to the literary lessons that are most

relevant for them and modeling how they may shape these lessons to their lives. Chaucer,

too, is deeply interested in the ways a diverse audience of vernacular readers might

experience, interpret, and learn from the texts they encounter. But differences between his

background and de Pizan's necessarily produce a difference in their focus, as well as in in

their understanding of what it is their readers need to learn, and how it is best to teach

them.

Despite growing up in a profoundly literate environment, Christine de Pizan, as I

have discussed, displays a persistent sense of social and intellectual marginalization.[1]

Chaucer, too, has a habit of placing his narrative doppelgängers on the margins of the

landscapes of discourse and knowledge he constructs in each of his works.[2] In his dream-

poems, his narrators, despite their intensive study of literary works about love, are never

quite able to achieve either the experience of love or the knowledge that will allow them to

---

[1] See Jacqueline Cerquiglini, "L'étrangère," *Revue des langues romanes* 92, no. 2 (1988): 239–51, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x002269797; Theresa Coletti, "Paths of Long Study: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28, no. 1 (2006): 6, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2006.0025.

[2] Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 6.

comprehend it.[3] Finding themselves face to face with bereaved lovers, wandering through

gardens of Nature and Temples of Venus, commanded by Cupid himself to write better

poems, these narrators traverse spaces where love is everywhere, and yet they are always,

somehow, outsiders.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the world is one not of love, but of discourse, where a

storytelling game provides the structural core of the work.[4] Yet in this space of discourse,

there is something strange about the Chaucer (or Chaucers) of the poem. Whereas all of the

other pilgrims are clearly identified by the social "estates" into which they may be placed,

the Chaucer-Pilgrim-Narrator alone is classless, without clear markers of social identity—

or even, within the diegetic framework of the tales, a name.[5] And in this context of socially-

grounded storytelling, the Chaucer-Pilgrim displays a conspicuous lack of finesse. When the

Host of the pilgrim company asks him to tell a tale, the Chaucer-Pilgrim obliges with the

tale of *Sir Thopas*, a painful parody of popular romance that the Host cuts short and roundly

---

[3] See Coletti, 6. In his seminal study of Chaucer's dream-poetry, A. C. Spearing offers several perspectives on the dream-narrators and their lack of success in love. On the status of Chaucer's narrator in the *House of Fame* as "a love-poet with no experience of love" who never really finds the tidings he seeks, see: A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 82–85. On the narrator of the *Parliament of Fowls* as seeking to learn more about love but remaining dissatisfied with what he does learn (although the audience may be more edified), see: Spearing, 89–101. On Chaucer's presentation of the Narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* as limited in his ability to write about love by his lack of experience with it, see: Spearing, 101–6.

[4] On the *Canterbury Tales* as foregrounding the interplay and competition between different forms of discourse, see: Peggy Ann Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001843826.

[5] On the Chaucer-Narrator's unrecognizability in terms of his social function, see: Lee Patterson, "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 118, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/659597/pdf.

criticizes (VII 919-35).[6] And when the Chaucer-Pilgrim protests that it is the best rhyme he

knows, the Host tells him to speak in prose, which he does, delivering the lengthy and

puzzling *Tale of Melibee*.[7] In a world of discourse, the Chaucer-narrator is strikingly

"removed from literary and other forms of cultural competence."[8]

Even if we imagine this pilgrim-narrator to be the same "Chaucer" that the Man of

Law backhandedly compliments in his introduction, there is still a sense of deficiency about

him. When introducing his tale, the Man of Law proclaims:

> I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
> That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
> On metres and on rymyng craftily,
> Hath seyd hem in swich Englissh as he kan
> Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
> And if he have noght seyd hem, leve brother,
> In o book, he hath seyd hem in another. (II 46-52)[9]

The "Chaucer" the Man of Law describes is prolific but incompetent, having read and retold

every tale one can imagine, but having written them all poorly. A bit of self-deprecating

---

[6] Critical opinion on *Sir Thopas* tends to concur with the Host's. In a rather representative reading, Helen Cooper calls it: "the one tale in the whole series deliberately written badly." Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 168, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31158009236604. For a rare dissenting view, see: Patterson, "'What Man Artow?'"

[7] Scholars have been more divided about this tale than they have about *Sir Thopas*, with some seeing it as similarly problematic, or even outright parodic, whereas others treat it as earnest in its goals and messages, despite apparent internal inconsistencies. For an example of a scholar who takes the former view, see: Dolores Palomo, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*," *Philological Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 304–20, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1290929977. For an example of the latter view, see: Stephen Yeager, "Chaucer's Prudent Poetics: Allegory, the *Tale of Melibee*, and the Frame Narrative to the *Canterbury Tales*," *The Chaucer Review* 48, no. 3 (2014): 307–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/chaucerrev.48.3.0307.

[8] Coletti, "Paths of Long Study," 6.

[9] All citations of Chaucer's works will be taken from: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All citations of the *Canterbury Tales* will be given parenthetically in text in the form: (fragment line(s))

humor on the author's part, certainly, but the association of this Chaucer with the Pilgrim-Chaucer who can write no better poem than *Thopas* paints a sobering picture: that of a writer who, no matter how much he reads, cannot seem to display any proficiency at his craft.

When Christine de Pizan mourns the deficiencies of her education, she mourns a lack of access. She cannot bathe in the Fountain of Knowledge; she can only snatch crumbs from the table and glean meager grains from the field.[10] Every bit of learning she exhibits has been hard-won through extensive study. And in making her way onto the Field of Letters, she leaves behind her a path for other women to follow. With Chaucer, the crisis we see is not one of access, but of skill. Based on what is known about Chaucer's early childhood, the place he grew up, and the knowledge of the schoolroom experience and curricula he exhibits in his works, scholars are fairly certain that Chaucer did go to school, and have been able to narrow down likely locations where he would have been educated.[11] Regardless of where he studied, he would have had both access to books and to a solid education in Latin and the liberal arts.[12] He was a boy, his family had the means to pay for his education: there were no systemic obstacles to prevent him learning as much as he could in his formative years.

---

[10] Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. Gabriella Parussa, second printing (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2008), Prologue, vv. 38-44, p. 196.

[11] See Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 37–41; Edith Rickert, "Chaucer at School," *Modern Philology* 29, no. 3 (1932): 257–74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/433612. As Peter Travis has argued, Chaucer also demonstrates an intimate knowledge of grammar-school curriculum in his *Nun's Priest's Tale.* Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 51–74.

[12] See Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 39; Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*, 51–74; Rickert, "Chaucer at School," 257–58.

As a result, what we see in Chaucer's personae are portraits of men with access to books and the ability to read them, but a pronounced difficulty in understanding what to make of them. We see similar deficiencies in the pilgrim-narrators of the *Canterbury Tales*, who despite their interpretative enthusiasm, are infamously bad at deriving meaningful lessons from the works they read.[13] The question is not one of access. Neither the Chaucer-Narrator nor any of the other pilgrims seem to have trouble acquiring books or knowledge of their content, regardless of their social class or level of education.[14] The question is, at its core, one of utility. In the worlds Chaucer presents in his various works, to hear stories told, to read them oneself, to be trained in traditional methods of explication, or to devise one's own reading strategies based on experience, cannot guarantee that one will be able to learn anything valuable from one's reading. They are worlds where people are eager to learn—to gain and make use of knowledge—but where they persistently fail to do so.

It is, of course, impossible to establish how much of Chaucer's self-presentation is literary license and how much reflects actual insecurities he may have harbored regarding his own knowledge. I do not propose to do so. But I do wish to suggest that the failures of interpretation and learning that he dramatizes throughout his corpus speak to what is evidently a much larger problem for him: that even if people have access to books, this does not mean that they know how to *read* them. What his readers need, then, is not a way into the works they read, but a way to learn something valuable once they get there.

While I cannot, in the space of this dissertation, cover every failing of Chaucer's

---

[13] See note 28 below.

[14] Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000), 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62998-5.

various readers or every preferable form of reading that Chaucer depicts or recommends, I

will nonetheless endeavor, in the following chapters, to tease out some of the interpretative

problems Chaucer depicts his readers as exhibiting and some of the solutions he offers

them. I will begin with the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's most sustained depiction of reading,

of storytelling, of interpretation, and of how these things can go very wrong.[15]

Eager Readers and Flawed Interpreters: The Canterbury Pilgrims

In the Pilgrim-narrators of the *Canterbury Tales*, we see a diverse group of readers whose

desire to learn (or to appear to have learned) from the works they read often outstrips

their interpretative skill. Whatever their social or educational backgrounds, Chaucer's

pilgrims are enthusiastic "readers" of the titular tales, quick to interpret both their own

tales and the tales of others. In some ways, this can be understood as a function of the

framework of the storytelling game itself. Since the tale of "best sentence and moost solaas"

wins the competition, it is to the tale-tellers' benefit to point out the "sentence" that others

might take from their tales (I 798). Beyond this salient motive, however, many of the

---

[15] In my analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*, I choose to read the pilgrims as representations of readers, whose habits of textual interpretation might be productively read as having reference to the interpretative practices of Chaucer's actual readers. I characterize these pilgrim-characters' interpretative practices based on their words, behaviors, and descriptions relative to their own tales and those of others, as presented in the links between tales and in the tales themselves. Because of my preference for more "explicit" moments of interpretation in the *Tales*, I necessarily focus less in this chapter on how individual tales can be understood as readings or interpretations of other tales on the metafictional level of the tale-telling competition. William Kamowski takes a similar approach in his analysis of the pilgrims' responses to *Melibee* and the *Clerk's Tale*, arguing that: "Since the pilgrim audience can be little influenced by Chaucer's narrative guidance in these two tales which are not of his own making, the pilgrims, who are his own creations, may indicate something of how the poet believes his real audience is predisposed to react to literature." William Kamowski, "Varieties of Response to *Melibee* and the *Clerk's Tale*," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 194, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010768995. For my part, I see the pilgrims as potentially serving this function even in the case of tales that Chaucer modified more heavily from his sources.

pilgrims seem legitimately interested in demonstrating that they have learned from—or

recommending that others learn from—the tales that the *other* pilgrims tell.[16] Before

hearing the *Pardoner's Tale*, for instance, the "gentils" of the company demand that he

"Telle us some moral thyng, that we may leere / Som wit" (VI 323-6). After hearing the

Reeve's unsavory tale, the Cook displays a similar impulse, deriving a moral from it,

applying a Biblical quotation to it, and remarking: "Wel oughte a man avysed for to be /

Whom that he broghte into his pryvetee" (I 4333-4).[17] Despite his preference for "merry"

tales,[18] the Host himself is an enthusiastic exegete, eagerly articulating the lessons he has

derived from the pilgrims' stories. The Franklin sees in the *Squire's Tale* a lesson for his son

(V 682-694). The Host sees in the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Tale of Melibee* a lesson for his wife

---

[16] In "Sentence and Solaas: The Function of the Hosts in the *Canterbury Tales*," L. M. Leitch presents this "desire for edification" as one that increases throughout the *Canterbury Tales* and ultimately triumphs in the end. L. M. Leitch, "Sentence and Solaas: The Function of the Hosts in the *Canterbury Tales*," *The Chaucer Review* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1982): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093812. This is in contrast with the opening of the work, which, Leitch argues, is characterized by a "generalized preference for merry tales" as a number of characters, particularly the Host, object to and discourage the telling of more serious or moral tales Leitch, 12. While I agree with a number of Leitch's claims, I do not see as strict of a demarcation as he does between the characters who desire solaas and the characters who desire sentence, as even the Host, who is the most bombastic in requesting merry tales and discouraging moral ones, moralizes about multiple tales over the course of the work. Nor do I see the pilgrims' desire for merry tales as entirely at odds with a desire for edification, as there are characters who strive to interpret "merry" tales (such as the Cook after the *Reeve's Tale*), as well as characters who all but refuse to explicitly interpret "moral" ones (as in the Host's response to the merry and moral *Nun's Priest's Tale*). Thus, I argue that a dislike for moralistic tales and a preference for merry ones does not necessarily indicate a hostility towards "edification" or to textual interpretation itself.

[17] He also displays a striking tendency to moralize his own tale-fragment for his listeners. As Helen Cooper observes: "The Cook's sententiousness is already apparent in the prologue to the tale, and this element is continued in the narration. The tale opens with a description of the apprentice Perkyn Revelour; once the action gets under way, every detail is underpinned with a proverb or maxim or moral generalisation . . . The only other tale in the whole collection that contains such a density of sententiae is the moral treatise *Melibee*." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 120.

[18] See Leitch, "Sentence and Solaas," 10–12.

(IV 1212a-g; VII 1889-1923). The Merchant sees in the Clerk's epilogue a general truth

about marriage (IV1213-32). And the Pardoner sees in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* a lesson

in the perils of taking a wife (III 163-68, 184-87). Even those pilgrims who approach the

tales of others with overt cynicism or hostility still tend to treat stories as articulating

"messages" from which readers may learn. The Reeve does so when he interprets the

Miller's Tale as a personal attack and an object lesson in hostile storytelling (I 3913-17).

The Pardoner does so when he expresses the belief that his moral tales might educate

others, even though he refuses to learn from them himself (VI 423-33). And the Summoner

does so when he reads the *Friar's Tale* as a work intended to teach its readers about the

depravity of summoners as a class (III 1290-91, 1665-74). While they have their individual

differences, the pilgrims, by and large, exhibit a belief that one can (and indeed ought) to

learn from literature, even if the lesson is unpleasantly personal.

The pilgrims have a valid reason to hold this belief. Education was, after all, one of

the core functions of literature as it was conceptualized in the Middle Ages.[19] And the

pilgrims would have been well aware of the personal benefits associated with literary

learning. In the vernacular context of changing readership, books—the ownership, reading,

and interpretation thereof—were linked to authority and to social status.[20] Monastic

readers had long since gathered collections of books, but in the later Middle Ages, upwardly

mobile middle class readers likewise sought to acquire edifying texts, as both a sign of

---

[19] For a brief overview of scholarly articulations of the fundamentally didactic character of
literature in the Middle Ages, see: Juanita Feros Ruys, "Introduction: Approaches to Didactic
Literature—Meaning, Intent, Audience, Social Effect," in *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic
Literature in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 4–5.

[20] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 18, 27–28, 31, 43.

conspicuous consumption and as a genuine means to improve themselves.[21] Noble readers,

too, collected morally and spiritually instructive works in addition to works of

entertainment.[22] And even though the books that are cited in the *Canterbury Tales* are not

physically present to the pilgrims, we can see these broader literary trends playing out in

miniature within the tale-telling competition, as the pilgrims hustle to learn what they can,

or to demonstrate that they have learned, from the texts they read.

    The way the pilgrims accomplish this is by treating most tales, regardless of

structure, genre, or teller, as in some way exemplary: as conveying through particular

examples some truth about the world, some moral principle, or some course of action to

imitate or eschew. [23] The moral "exemplum"—defined conventionally as "a short narrative

used to illustrate or confirm a general principle"[24]—was a common narrative form in the

---

[21] Amtower, 27–28; Malcolm Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," in *The Mediaeval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby, vol. 2, Literature and Western Civilization (London: Aldus Books, 1973), 562, 565, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015020696905; Andrew Taylor, "Authors, Scribes, Patrons, and Books," in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 363–64, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

[22] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 25–27, 31, 35, 48; Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," 557, 564.

[23] See J. Allen Mitchell's comment that some of the pilgrims: "readily construe tales of any kind—fabliau, saint's life, allegorical dialogue, secular romance—as having exemplary import for them, in relation to their specific personal or professional preoccupations." J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 85. Lisa Kiser identifies the Host as the most prominent reader of this kind. As she puts it: "Nearly every tale is some kind of exemplum to Harry Bailly—art to him is a close representation of life that exists primarily to recall (and perhaps directly affect) the reader's own life; it is a mirror with a motto, if you will." Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), 124, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002471519.

[24] Joseph Albert Mosher, *The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), 1, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t6h14768d. In his analysis of exemplarity in the Chaucerian tradition, Larry Scanlon critiques the "imprecision" of this definition, but it suffices in a general sense for my purposes here. Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval*

Middle Ages, appended to sermons, slipped into treatises for rhetorical effect, and collected in conduct guides or mirrors for princes.[25] Many tales that were not explicitly exempla also made use of exemplary rhetoric, urging audiences to treat them as guides to behavior, as encouragements or admonishments, or as affectively compelling illustrations of vice, virtue, or other verities.[26] Even in the absence of such injunctions, readers could choose to treat any kind of narrative as exemplary, by, as J. Allen Mitchell puts it, "reading for the moral": pragmatically "reducing" an open-ended text to a conclusive "point," personalized to the reader, which could then be used as a guide to ethical action in the reader's own life.[27]

In light of the pilgrims' desire for real or feigned learning, one can see the value of this approach to reading. Reading for the moral allows one to convert a complex text into a practical, edifying insight. In addition, these condensed messages can function both to help the reader learn from the text and to provide them with tokens to "demonstrate" that they have learned from it. By nature susceptible to excerption and transfer between texts and people, moral messages can function as a kind of social and didactic currency.

Thus, upon encountering a tale, the pilgrim-listeners, at least the more talkative ones, tend to interpret (based on a selection of textual details, personal preoccupations,

---

Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4. In my discussion of exemplarity, I focus primarily on Allen's and Mitchell's treatments of the topic, as Scanlon's focus on exemplary narratives as reinforcing social authority is a bit at odds with my interests here.

[25] Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–3, 160n8.

[26] Allen, 3. As Elizabeth Allen argues, exemplarity was more of a didactic *mode* than a discrete form or genre.

[27] Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 14–20.

and hermeneutic strategies) what the "message" or "point" of the text may be: what truth it represents, what moral it illustrates, what behaviors it recommends or discourages, or how one might adopt better forms of behavior by "taking example" from it. After devising this interpretation, the pilgrim in question will announce it in the form of a brief statement of the tale's didactic benefits, a recital of the moral they have taken from the tale, or a judgment about the tale itself. Having done so, they are able, in essence, to "prove" that they have learned from the tale, and thus to reap the benefits of both edification and social clout.

In practice, however, what the pilgrims tend to "learn" from the tales they hear are lessons that are simplistic, irrelevant, antisocial, or blatantly false.[28] While performing a kind of pragmatic reduction on a text is essential, as Mitchell argues, to deriving a usable moral from it, the pilgrims have a habit of reducing the tales to statements whose practical moral application is limited or problematic.[29] Even when the pilgrims hit upon morals that might have broader benefit, these morals are often phrased in a way that exonerates the speaker from having to act upon them or are blatantly ignored in subsequent acts of tale-telling and interpretation.

What is it that causes these characters' interpretative endeavors to go so wrong? The answer, I argue, may lie in their profound reluctance to be *challenged* by the works they read. We see this reluctance in the haste with which the Host interprets tales and in

---

[28] The interpretative obtuseness of the Canterbury Pilgrims, in particular the Host, has been commented on extensively in the scholarship. See, for example: Alan T. Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," *PMLA* 82, no. 2 (May 1967): 226–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/461292; Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 193; Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 155, 176, 180; Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 145–48.

[29] Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 17–19.

his profound discomfort with works that evoke unpleasant emotions.[30] We see it in the attempt of the Reeve to shut down a potentially offensive narrative by interpreting its meaning before he has even heard it (I 3144-49). We see it in the Knight, who urges the Monk not to tell such unhappy stories (VII 2767-79). And we see it in the disinclination, implicit or explicit, of many pilgrims to hear overtly "difficult" or sententious tales.[31] Chaucer's characters might wish to learn from the stories they hear, but they would like this learning process to be quick, easy, and devoid of uncomfortable ambiguities.

As a result of this desire, we see the pilgrims prioritizing hermeneutic strategies that allow them to produce a reading of a text as quickly as possible while doing the minimum amount of engagement with the complexities of the work itself.[32] Grabbing onto a few salient details, they rush through the process of textual interpretation,[33] looking for a

---

[30] See, for example, his response to the *Physician's Tale*, in which he strives to contain his distress at Virginia's fate by expressing a desire for a drink and asking that the Pardoner tell a humorous tale as a kind of antidote to sorrow (VI 287-319).

[31] Some examples, also cited in Leitch's article, are the Shipman, who will not let the Parson preach following the *Man of Law's Tale* because he might "sowen som difficulte," and the Friar, who is reluctant to hear more of the "scole-matere" of "greet difficultee" that the Wife of Bath discusses in her Prologue and Tale (II 1182, III 1272), Leitch, "Sentence and Solaas," 12.

[32] No reading, of course, is going to be purely faithful to the text or take it entirely "on its own terms", since how the reader interprets the text is going to be influenced by his identity, context, perspective, biases, etc. This is something that Chaucer, as Ferster argues, acknowledges in various ways throughout his works. Nonetheless, in a number of his works, he also suggests the importance of a "good-faith" engagement with the object of interpretation, whereby the reader earnestly attempts to understand the text/"other," even if this understanding is always based, in some ways, on a projection of the self onto the other. Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 66–68.

[33] One could argue that the pilgrims' haste is less a factor of their general approach to reading and more a by-product of the Host and the company's general desire to rush the tale-telling game along. In "The Function of the Host in the Canterbury Tales," for example, Cynthia C. Richardson notes the Host's near-obsession with the passage of time. Cynthia Richardson, "The Function of the Host in The Canterbury Tales," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 333–39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40754105. L. M. Leitch likewise notes that both the framework of

single, determinate message that succinctly encapsulates the tale's meaning and the lessons that one may learn from it.

Their strategies for doing so are varied. Some pilgrims use a consideration of genre as a way to quickly acquire this message. Treating a work's genre as the exclusive determinant of its meaning, they are able to form judgments about tales incredibly quickly, possibly even before they have heard them. Others use a form of social labeling to rush the reading process: assigning labels to each character in a work and then reasoning that if the work *contains* one kind of person, then it must be making some kind of general statement about all people of that kind. Some even use this label-based form of interpretation as a handy means to push the responsibility for learning off onto somebody else. Establishing the categories into which the work and its characters may be divided—generic, social, personal—the pilgrims use these categories as shortcuts to meaning, quick ways to identify the details they can use to devise a moral. And once they have stated this moral, and have demonstrated that they have come up with their own independent interpretation of a text, one that they will *surely* act upon in the future, then they are free to stop thinking about the

the storytelling game and the pressures of an impatient audience make the pilgrims conscious of how long they are taking to tell their tales. Leitch, "Sentence and Solaas," 7–9. The pilgrims' haste, I would argue, is not simply a pragmatic response to the pressures of time, however, but also a product of their discomfort with interpretative challenges, which they show in a variety of ways. Some of their hasty interpretations, for example, are presented, as in the case of the Reeve, before the tales have even begun, suggesting less a sense of hurry and more a sense of aversion to the tale itself. In this case, the Reeve's hast is motivated by a need to have done with the tale, rather than his need to have done with the tale being motivated by haste. Similarly, the Knight interrupts the Monk not because the Monk is taking too long, but because the Monk's tales are making him uncomfortable. In addition, some of the strategies that may facilitate hasty interpretation are encouraged by certain pilgrims for reasons other than haste (as with the Reeve), performed upon texts prior to their telling (as with the Monk), or presented retrospectively as ways that they or others have read (as with the Wife of Bath). This suggests that they understand these reading strategies as occurring both within and outside of the pilgrimage, as well as having utility beyond simple expediency. Ultimately, regardless of the specific causes of the pilgrims' haste, the *Canterbury Tales* vividly shows the interpretative consequences of this haste.

work altogether.

In their evident hurry to reach the conclusion of the reading experience, however, what they wind up with are lessons that are *wrong* for them. These morals may flatter their egos, confirm what they already know, give them an excuse for their bad behavior, or allow them to justify passing the ethical buck to another person. But they do not represent a real experience of learning: of a confrontation with a text that in some way has the potential to *change them*.[34] As Mitchell argues:

> Medieval didactic theory was signally preoccupied with the impact of the ethos of art upon the will and affections, or the way art effects a change in persons. The didacticism of the ethics of exemplarity likewise gestures beyond or operates outside the literal, the conventional, or the merely textual (of the *texte*) to engage substantive parts of an individual's moral life (hors-*texte*).[35]

Exemplary narratives, or indeed any works of art or literature, are the most didactically effective when, in one way or another, they work change in the reader: in their behaviors, their attitudes, their base of knowledge, or their moral character. In opposition to this goal, the hasty hermeneutic strategies that allow Chaucer's pilgrims to quickly reach the end of

---

[34] In *Chaucer on Interpretation*, Judith Ferster argues that Chaucer presents interpretation as dialectic, with the reader's identity and context shaping his interpretation of the text's meaning, while both text and context also shape the reader. Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 3–4. When analyzing how this dialectic is depicted in the *Parliament of Fowls*, she argues that the poem presents active engagement with both text and world, and with the possibility for these things to *change* the reader, in a positive light. As she puts it: "To engage with the world is to project the self onto it while interpreting it and to submit to being changed by it. In the process of risking ourselves to understand the world and of committing ourselves to act in it, we love it." Ferster, 66. The problem is that while Chaucer's pilgrims are perfectly willing to project themselves onto the texts they read, few of them, even the most astute readers, are necessarily willing to risk allowing the experience to change them.

[35] Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 15.

the reading process function to prevent them from learning anything of value along the way.

In detailing the shortcomings of his pilgrims' reading strategies, however, Chaucer also offers his readers an alternative. For Chaucer's pilgrims are not entirely without knowledge or skills that could conduce to beneficial reading. Rather, as mentioned above, the specific interpretative mistakes they make come from a corruption or over-simplification of legitimate reading strategies and tools. Reading for genre, considering social labels, and imagining the specific, practical ways in which a text might work positive changes in a reader's life are all valuable resources if undertaken with an open mind, with an eye for the details of the text, and a tolerance of difficulty and ambiguity. In providing his readers with the ambiguous examples of characters whose desire for interpretative ease leads them to misuse their tools, he thus also calls attention to the tools themselves—tools that, if used correctly, can be legitimately valuable. And although he shows how reading strategies informed by these tools can go wrong, Chaucer also provides his readers with examples of how they can go right.[36] Through his pilgrim-readers, then, Chaucer offers his real-world readers a series of examples to think through. Without explicitly demanding that readers reassess their reading strategies, Chaucer uses these characters to present

---

[36] These examples are not, however, prescriptive. As William Kamowski argues, because Chaucer does not clearly define what makes a good reader, "That definition, which of course must be a loose one, is left to his literary audience, the members of which perform the task of definition as they assess how well the various pilgrims perform as members of a fictional audience. The poet offers some direction: he implies that failure to proceed with personal detachment contaminates aesthetic response, but he provides no adequate system of responding to literature among the pilgrims. That omission is appropriate because, for a critical response to be genuine, it must be the construct of the individual listener or reader, not the response of characters in the action." Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 193. While I disagree with Kamowski's interpretation that Chaucer thinks of personal detachment as good or the "contamination" it offers as entirely bad, I agree that in hinting at, but refusing to ultimately define, what it means to be a good reader, he asks his readers to do the very kind of engaged critical reading that will inevitably make them better readers.

readers with opportunities to develop kinds of reading and interpretation that are slower,

more flexible, more adaptable, and more difficult: methods that challenge them to look at a

text in different ways, to lean into its complexities, and to expand their sense of what it can

teach them.[37] Rather than sticking with the easiest interpretative method, readers are

invited to consider multiple interpretative options, to look closely at the details of the

works they read, and to develop interpretations that are relevant and actionable in their

own lives.[38] If Christine de Pizan's goal, then, is to give readers access to texts that would

---

[37] I am not alone in seeing the limited interpretations of Chaucer's characters as encouragement for real-world readers to develop their own deeper, more complex interpretations. As Allen argues about literature of this era more generally: "Embedded readers stage possible acts of interpretation; they disambiguate the moral message, but they also provide foils for imagined extratextual audiences, performing obviously limited acts of reception in order to call attention to the importance of audiences' contribution to moral meaning." Allen regards Chaucer's Host as one such embedded reader. Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 18. Peter W. Travis likewise argues that "To guide the reader in the direction of right reading, Chaucer in each of his longer works intimates the outlines of a 'mock audience'—a caricature reader whose interpretative habits any 'ideal' reader would wish to escape from by developing a more refined and self-critical set of interpretative norms." Peter W. Travis, "Affective Criticism, the Pilgrimage of Reading, and Medieval English Literature," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 205. As William Kamowski puts it: "As members of a fictional audience, the pilgrims exhibit uncritical tendencies which Chaucer would have considered unsuitable responses to literature. In fact, throughout the *Canterbury Tales* in the interplay between the tales and the links, Chaucer' seems to define what a literary audience should not be, although he does not correspondingly define those qualities which he would find in an ideal set of listeners/readers." Rather, although he provides some suggestions, he leaves it to his readers to define what constitutes an acceptable literary/critical response. Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 193. See also Anne Middleton's argument that Chaucer's narratives, filtered through the limited and fragmentary perspectives of many fictional readers and storytellers, "succeed with us largely to the extent that they fail their tellers . . . The point of any story is fragmented among several coexistent but mutually exclusive readings of it, and its value emerges only in the reader's ability to understand and entertain their several claims upon him" Anne Middleton, "The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs: Ensamples Mo than Ten as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*," *The Chaucer Review* 8, no. 1 (1973): 15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093247.

[38] Much of this meaning-making, it is true, may be to a certain degree involuntary, intuitive, and unconscious. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 19–20. As Mitchell puts it: "Like eyesight, moral insight will frequently be the sense of having an independent impression impose itself upon us." Mitchell, 20n58. One might despair, then, of teaching readers how to read "better." As Mitchell notes, however: "Perception and meaning can change on reflection." Mitchell, 20n58. In presenting the pilgrims as he does, Chaucer can be understood as encouraging his readers to *reflect* on their

otherwise shut them out, Chaucer's goal is to stop his readers from shutting *themselves* out

of the reading experience. And his pilgrim-narrators, flawed and imperfect as they are, are

the tools he uses to do so.

Strategy 1: Genre Reading

The first of the flawed hermeneutic strategies I will be discussing involves a kind of

"reading for genre"—a practice that is based in solid principles of textual interpretation,

but is frequently corrupted by the pilgrims' desire for interpretative simplicity.[39] I refer

here specifically to literary genres, which I define, in the broadest sense, as the categories

or "kinds" into which texts may be grouped based on "some combination of thematic,

formal, or pragmatic similarities."[40] As Julie Orlemanski puts it, "genres are varieties of

writing characterized by *what* they discuss, *how* they discuss it, and for what *purpose* or

---

implicit reading strategies and the conclusions they lead them to. And inasmuch as "Meaning is a matter of use, skill, or custom," one can surely cultivate different habits of meaning-making with time and practice. Mitchell, 20n58. Indeed, although Chaucer by and large suggests that it is not possible for a writer to completely control readers' responses to his writing (see Jill Mann, "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer," in *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 1–12.) this does not mean that he never offers his readers guidance on reading or strives to influence them. Rather, he provides them, as Middleton observes, with multiple interpretative options to choose from and to think through. Middleton, "Ensamples Mo than Ten," 15–16.

[39] I borrow the form of the term "reading for genre" from Mitchell's "reading for the moral," which he in turn derives from Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 14n30.

[40] Julie Orlemanski, "Genre," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 211, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781118328736. I focus here on specifically literary genres, bearing in mind that, as Julie Orlemanski argues, "Every act of communication has a genre – which is to say that it is situated within governing conventions that shape its expression and reception." Orlemanski, 212.

audience they do so."[41] Each genre can be understood as having a set of norms and conventions: defined, delimited, modified, and replicated by the works that constitute a particular genre, by the demands and constraints of the situations to which the genre responds, and by public conceptions and uses of texts in this genre.[42] Writers learn these conventions based on their past experiences of reading, writing, and communication, and this understanding shapes the kinds of works they produce in different contexts and for different purposes.[43] Readers, for their part, come to recognize and expect certain kinds of texts to have certain characteristics and fulfill certain functions, and they engage with these texts accordingly.[44]

A work's genre can thus be understood, in line with the influential theories of Hans Robert Jauss, as a "preconstituted horizon of expectations," "constituted for the reader from out of a tradition or series of previously known works," which serves "to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception."[45] This "horizon of

---

[41] Orlemanski, "Genre," 211.

[42] See John Frow, *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2006), 14–16; Orlemanski, "Genre," 211–13. In my discussion of genre, I will not be attempting here to list or taxonomixe medieval genres—rather, I am more interested in how a concept of genre, of the "types" into which tales may be grouped, informs some of Chaucer's interpretative endeavors. When I discuss characters interacting with tales based on their genre, I refer to judgments, interpretations, and uses of tales that appear to be grounded in a sense of the generic "kinds" into which tales may be grouped, with all of their associated norms and conventions. For a study that attempt to provide just such a list or taxonomy of medieval narrative terms, see: Paul Strohm, "Middle English Narrative Genres," *Genre* 13, no. 3 (1980): 379–88, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106005791899.
[43] Orlemanski, "Genre," 212–13.

[44] For a discussion of how readers "recognize" generic cues and how this shapes their engagement with texts, see: Frow, *Genre*, 101–4, 114–16.

[45] Hans Robert Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 79. Orlemanski and Frow, drawing from Jauss, adopt similar formulations of genre in their own works. As Orlemanski puts it: "A genre is not simply a group of texts, however classified, labeled, and defined.

expectations" refers, in essence, to a reader or writer's perception of the communicative possibilities and probabilities afforded by a genre: what situations works in this genre tend to respond to, to whom they are likely to be directed, what protocols they are expected to adhere to, what rhetorical constraints may be placed upon them, what topics they are likely to discuss, what their features tend to be, what attitudes they tend to take towards their subject matter, whether or not they are to be understood as making truth-claims, how they ought to be interpreted, and who is in their audience and what these people are expected to know. Collectively, these expectations point to the "situation of understanding" within which a literary work may be located.[46]

To recognize the genre or genres a work is performing, based on the cues it offers, is thus an important step in interpreting that work.[47] As John Frow puts it, "Genre guides interpretation because it is a constraint on semiosis, the production of meaning; it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context, and so makes certain senses of an utterance more probable, in the circumstances, than others."[48] By providing cues that make reference to their generic frames, texts "seek to situate themselves rhetorically, to define and delimit their uptake by a reader," and by perceiving

---

It consists equally in the schematic *sense* of what is to be expected in a certain kind of literary experience and how this sense is modulated within specific works and over time." Orlemanski, "Genre," 215–16. Likewise, Frow argues: "Genre thus defines a set of expectations which guide our engagement with texts." Frow, *Genre*, 104.

[46] Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," 79. For a detailed study of the medieval English "horizons of expectations" for the romance genre that has implications for the study and definition of other medieval genres, see: Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009).

[47] Frow, *Genre*, 114–15.

[48] Frow, 101.

these cues, readers are able to understand how they are meant to read these texts.[49] "If we are to read well," argues Frow, "we cannot but attend to those embedded assumptions and understandings which are structured by the frameworks of genre and from which we work inferentially to the full range of textual meaning."[50]

Genre thus constitutes a kind of framework[51] for textual interpretation that readers engage with when they produce interpretations of particular texts, and which helps them to produce more "likely," "relevant," and contextually "appropriate" interpretations.[52] Awareness of genre helps to make texts legible for the reader, and is a vital tool in reader's hermeneutic endeavors. And with his frequent labeling of genres, his playing of texts of different genres against each other, and the wide range of genres and generically-mixed works he provides throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer takes steps to make genre available as a lens through which his readers may interpret the texts he gives them.[53]

His emphasis on genre, coupled with his dramatization of the pilgrims' responses to

---

[49] Frow, 114–15.

[50] Frow, 101.

[51] On genres as akin to textual "frames," see: Frow, 103–9.

[52] Orlemanski, "Genre," 212; Frow, *Genre*, 101.

[53] As Tony Davenport notes, Chaucer is unusual among medieval writers for his tendency to explicitly label the genres of his works. Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30. Caroline D. Eckhardt makes a similar observation, noting that Chaucer uses a number of terms that evoke literary terms or literary genres, of which she provides a non-exhaustive list; including: "*avisioun, balade, carole, comedye, compleynt, cronicle, dreme, epistel, fable, geste, lay, legende, lyf, meditacioun, metres, miracle, omelies, parables, pleyes of myracles, preamble, predicacioun, prologe, prose, prouerbis, romaunce, rondel, ryme, sermoun, storie, sweven, tretis, tragedye, virelai, visioun, ympne*, and *vers*, as well as the more general *book, song, tale*, and *thyng*." Caroline D. Eckhardt, "Genre," in *A New Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 189. Although Chaucer's usage of these terms varies, and he does not always use them to refer to concepts of genre, "such a lexicon" nonetheless, as Eckhardt argues, "documents Chaucer's interest in genre and calls upon his audiences to bring it within their interpretative agenda as well." Eckhardt, 189.

the tales they hear, however, also calls attention to the ways in which genre can be misused as an interpretative tool. For while Chaucer's pilgrims clearly possess a "horizon of expectations" for works in different genres that they consult when considering how texts are to be interpreted, for many of the pilgrims these "expectations" possess a disturbing element of rigidity. Indeed, a number of Chaucer's pilgrims treat genres and their conventions not as expectations but as *rules*: hard limits on what, where, and how a text can signify.[54]

In these pilgrims' approach to textual interpretation, to know a text's genre is not merely to know information about *how* one might interpret it: it is, more or less, to have a preconceived interpretation or response ready to be fitted onto any text of a particular genre. If one expects that comic tales can never contain moral content, then one can allow oneself to simply laugh at such tales without bothering to think. If one believes that sermons are inevitably sententious and difficult to parse, then one can refuse to allow them to be delivered in casual contexts. If one believes that all saints' lives express the same moral, then to have read one is to have read them all. While certain pilgrims show a more flexible understanding of genre (or an understanding of textual categories that is, as I will discuss, equally rigid, but in different ways), for many among the company, to know enough about a work to assign it to a genre is to have already done all of the work one needs in order to interpret it. By placing dramatic limitations on a text's range of meanings: constraining its horizons into the smallest possible compass, these readers are able to

---

[54] This ossification of expectations is not inevitable. As Furrow explains: "Horizons of expectations change as readers change, gaining experience of other members of the genre that do this but not that, and perhaps add something quite other; the genre changes as writers change the horizon." Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 58–59. The approach to genre displayed by some of the pilgrims, however, is striking in its fixity, and marked by an unwillingness to entertain differences between works in the same genre or to adjust generic expectations in response to these differences.

efficiently parse the texts they encounter, sorting them based on relevance, applying a stereotyped interpretative approach to those that seem worthy of "reading" and rejecting those that don't. The problem is that doing so severely constrains their ability to be surprised by literary works, to consider their idiosyncratic details, and to come to complex conclusions about them. It limits, in a word, their ability to learn from the texts they read.

This limited and limiting interpretative approach can be seen most clearly in the Monk's treatment of the genre of tragedy. The Monk, as a storyteller, is deeply concerned with genre. Before he even begins his tale, he is careful to explicitly define the genre of the work, stating:

> . . . tragedies wol I telle,
> Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.
> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
> As olde bookes maken us memorie,
> Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
> and is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly." (VII 1871-7).

He follows this definition with a brief overview of the most common meter in which tragedies are presented, as well as other forms in which one may find them. After having clearly established the definition of tragedy, he reiterates it in the opening lines of his tale, stating: "I wol biwaille in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree, / And fillen so that ther nas no remedie / To brynge hem out of hir adversitee." (VII 1991-1994). He finishes his introduction by explicitly stating the moral that works of tragedy illustrate: those of high degree will inevitably fall, because Fortune cannot be trusted. As he states: "For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee, / Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde. / Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee; / Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde." (VII 1995-1998).

The Monk's definition of genre is oddly thorough and specific, perhaps because

tragedy was a bit of an unusual genre in the Middle Ages. As Julie Orlemanski explains:

> The term *tragoedia* circulated in medieval responses to scattered classical uses of
> the word and to its appearance in Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* and the
> *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville. Because the genre lacked defining representatives
> (classical tragedies being almost entirely unknown), it functioned mainly as an
> empty category. The small body of received ideas on the form tended to assume
> loose but idiosyncratic articulations.[55]

As a genre, tragedy occupied: "the margins of literature—a category in search of texts, a

classifying gesture without much to order, the vestige of a literary sensibility that no

medieval writer or reader quite shared."[56] Because of this, one can understand the Monk's

scrupulous efforts to define the genre as an attempt to artificially establish a "horizon of

expectations" for an audience that may be less familiar with it, so that they may understand

the stories he tells in the way he intends.

By virtue of the way he defines what this genre is and does, however, he brings to

light a more insidious method of genre-thinking practiced by other pilgrims in the

company: whereby, working from their existing horizons of expectations, they dramatically

limit their understandings of what works in particular genres can mean. Indeed, the Monk

does not simply define tragedy for his audience and then give them an example of how

tragedies may be interpreted: after establishing the moral that his tales will exemplify, he

proceeds to methodically demonstrate how the same moral can be taken from nearly every

tale he tells.[57] In doing so, he models an approach to textual interpretation in which genre

---

[55] Orlemanski, "Genre," 208.

[56] Orlemanski, 211.

[57] I say *nearly*, because the moral the Monk draws from the tale of Sampson seems more inclined to
blame women than Fortune for Sampson's fall from grace. As the Monk says: "Beth war by this

is the principal, if not exclusive factor one needs to consider when interpreting the meaning

of a work. Thus he tells tale after tale of the fall of the great, and in almost every tale, he

mentions explicitly that Fortune played a role in the protagonist's downfall. Upon relating

the narrative of the death of Hercules, he asks: "Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe?

. . . Beth war, for whan Fortune list to glose, / Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe /

By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose." (VII 2136-42). At the end of the tale of

Balthazar, he states: "Lordynges, ensample heerby may ye take / How that in lordshipe is

no sikernesse, / For whan Fortune wole a man forsake, / She bereth awey his regne and his

richesse" (VII 2239-2242). Upon relating the death of Pierre de Lusignan, he says: "Thus

kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye,/ And out of joye brynge men to sorwe." (VII 2397-

8). And when telling the tale of Julius Caesar, he states: "of Rome emperour was he / Til

that Fortune weex his adversarie." (VII 2677-8). Out of the sixteen tragedies he tells, all but

four directly mention Fortune.

In case his readers somehow miss the point he is trying to make, he concludes his

tale by explicitly telling them the lesson about tragedy he means to teach:

> Tragediës *noon oother manere thyng*
> Ne kan in syngyng crie ne biwaille
> But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
> With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;
> For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
> And covere hire brighte face with a clowde." (VII 2761-6) (emphasis mine)

In his own words, tragedies can convey *no other meaning* than the one he has announced at

---

ensample oold and playn / That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves / Of swich thyng as they wolde
han secree fayn, / If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves." (VII 2091-4). This tale is an outlier,
however, as in every other tale he either gives no explicit moral or explicitly associates the
protagonist's fall with Fortune in some way, even in cases where a female character plays a role in
the protagonist's fall.

the beginning: Fortune always assails the powerful, and therefore cannot be trusted.[58] If it

is possible for tragedies to bewail other things (or even do anything other than bewail), the

Monk is not willing to entertain this possibility. And by modeling this approach to genre for

his readers, he encourages them to read his tale in the same way: to disregard the

individual details of the stories in favor of observing how, by virtue of their genre, they all

support a single, predetermined meaning.[59] Neither the experience of the individual reader

nor the details of the text matter in this approach: only genre is important.

Unfortunately for the Monk, this is *exactly* how his readers approach his work. By

objecting to elements of the Monk's definition of tragedy, the horizon of interpretative rules

that the he sets for his listeners, the Knight, for example, is able to dismiss all of the Monk's

tales without necessarily having paid too much attention to their details.[60] After the Monk

---

[58] Indeed, there is very little that is substantially different between this final articulation of the moral and the Monk's initial statements. As Cooper observes: "The only new idea introduced into this formulation since the prologue stanza is the notion that there is some measure of just retribution in the actions of Fortune, and that is not borne out by the tragedies themselves; apart from this, the lines are mere repetition, and underscore the lack of any development in the series. The Monk's Tale could go on indefinitely—at least to his threatened hundred—without making any progress at all." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 178–79.

[59] In criticizing the Monk's interpretative approach, I do not intend to take a stand on the quality or interest of the *Monk's Tale* itself. It has been regarded variably as dull and monotonous and as rhetorically diverse and interesting. For an overview of the criticism on this subject (up to the mid-90s), see: Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, 136–39, 142, and footnotes on these pages. Regardless of whether the Host's and Knight's assessments of the *Monk's Tale* are justified, I hope to establish how the Monk's interpretative strategy, picked up and imitated by his listeners, impoverishes their readings of the text they are presented with. For a similar argument, based on the idea that the Monk's tales are actually diverse and interesting, but that the interpretative strategies of the Monk, Host, Knight, and critics of the tale tend to generalize and flatten them, see: Emily Jensen, "'Winkers' and 'Janglers': Teller/Listener/Reader Response in the *Monk's Tale,* the Link, and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 183–95, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096008.

[60] As Emily Jensen argues: "The Monk, of course, sets up both the Knight and Host to respond as they do by introducing his several narratives with blanket definition of tragedy and, because of that, seeming to insist that each example reveals the same principle: trusting in 'blynd prosperitee'

has concluded his tales, the Knight proclaims:

> . . . good sire, namoore of this!
> That ye han seyd is right ynough, ywis,
> And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse
> Is right ynogh to muche folk, I gesse.
> I seye for me, it is a greet disese,
> Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,
> To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!
> And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,
> As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
> And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
> And there abideth in prosperitee.
> Swych thyng is gladsom, as it thynketh me,
> And of swich thyng were goodly for to telle. (VII 2767-79)

Although the Knight delivers this complaint after hearing sixteen of the Monk's tales, he

could just as well have done so immediately after hearing the Monk's initial definition of

tragedy, as he mentions almost no details of the tales beyond the material covered in the

Monk's introduction. Indeed, the Knight's objection is not to any one tale in particular but

to their shared genre of tragedy, as defined by the Monk. The Monk has said that tragedy

always concerns the fall of the great, and nothing else, and this is the Knight's objection to

it: that it is uncomfortable to hear of the "sodeyn fal" of the rich and powerful. And because

of the "disese" that hearing such tales causes him, the Knight concludes that it is "goodly" to

tell tales with happy endings, with the implicit corollary that it is not good to tell tragedies,

or possibly, given the tragic elements of the *Knight's Tale*, that it is not good to tell too many

sequentially or too many unmixed with happier matter.[61] While the Knight's points are

---

makes one prey to the whims of Fortune and results inevitably in one's fall." Jensen, "'Winkers' and 'Janglers,'" 184. She sees in their responses not simply the Monk's presumptions, however, but rather a broader human tendency to "abstract generalized meaning from particulars," present in contemporary scholars as well as pilgrims. Jensen, 183–84, 189.

[61] As Helen Cooper argues, "The Knight's own tale is sufficient indication that he is not advocating the telling of none but happy stories. His story had balanced Arcite's tragedy with Palamon's

valid, this is not a complex insight derived from analysis of the tales. It is a knee-jerk

reaction driven by the Knight's own emotional discomfort at a series of distressing

narratives about the fall of the wealthy and powerful that may hit a bit too close to home.

As Michaela Paasche Grudin argues, the Knight is treated here as a "representative of the

class of the well-to do," and in his critique of the *Monk's Tale*, he narrows the Monk's

definition of tragedy even more than the Monk does, focusing not on general falls from

fortune, but rather on the "more specifically material fall from wealth and ease."[62] The

Knight's material focus, coupled with a consternation only partially masked by his

decorous speech, suggests that "he is visibly uncomfortable with a subject matter that

warns against trusting in 'blynd prosperitee' and that reminds him of the precariousness of

his own well-being."[63] His cognizance of his own social position makes him reluctant to

hear tales about privileged men losing their material goods. By making a claim about the

tales' genre, however, he can dismiss the lot of them without having to think about their

uncomfortable implications for himself.[64]

---

romance, his rising to the top of Fortune's wheel and abiding there, 'lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele' (I 3102)." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 179. Grudin, for her part, comments on the surprising disjunction between the not overtly wealthy Knight of the prologue who tells a tragic tale and the Knight here, who seems to be "allergic to tragedy" Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, 147. She relates the inconsistencies in his character and the Host's to Chaucer's efforts to suggest "the possible deficiencies of the literary artist's audience," and I would agree that consistency in characterization is less important for Chaucer here than dramatizing problematic readerly responses Grudin, 148.

[62] Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, 145–46.

[63] Grudin, 146.

[64] Grudin likewise sees the Knight's objections as having to do with genre. As she argues: "the Knight yearns for a genre that records the rise to "prosperitee." . . . Such a genre, presumably, would mirror and validate his own situation and suggest its continuance. If there is any genre that by definition cannot do this it is tragedy." Grudin, 146.

The Host, at this point, has paid very little attention to the *Monk's Tale*. For one

thing, he confesses that he was hardly able to stay awake during the narrative and was kept

from falling asleep only by the sounds of the bells jingling on the Monk's harness (VII 2794-

7).[65] As it is, he cannot even remember the last line of the work correctly, stating that the

Monk: "spak how Fortune covered with a clowde / I noot nevere what" (VII 2782-3). He

also seems vague on the details of the middle of the tale, since he states: "als of a tragedie /

Right now ye herde," neglecting to note that the Monk has not only told *a* tragedy, but

several (VII 2783-4). Indeed, the Host seems to only have been paying attention during the

very beginning and the very end of the tale, since his objection only references the specific

wording from these two parts of the narrative.

By using the Monk's own methods of reading against him, however, the Host is able

to come to a conclusion about the tale despite having retained next to nothing of it. Like the

Monk and the Knight, the Host treats it as a given that tragedy can only do and say one

thing. And on that basis, he dismisses the entire genre.[66] Thus, he says:

> . . . this Monk he clappeth lowde.
> He spak how Fortune covered with a clowde
> I noot nevere what; and als of a tragedie
> Right now ye herde, and pardee, no remedie

---

[65] Grudin likewise notes that that the Host's sudden grasping "for key words from the Monk's performance to back up his agreement with the Knight" suggests, as will later be confirmed, that he has "slept through most of the tale." Grudin, 146–47.

[66] Cooper and Grudin are both inclined to read the Knight's response as more sophisticated and considered than the Host's. Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 179–80; Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, 146–47. Both responses, however, are equally based on a straightforward emotional response to the *Monk's Tale* rather than an engagement with its details, and both are equally geared towards drawing a halt to its telling. The Knight's cry of "allas!" certainly suggests a breakthrough of feeling in his otherwise calm discussion of the drawbacks of the *Monk's Tale*, and his central argument, that no more such tales should be told, is at its core the same as the Host's.

It is for to biwaille ne compleyne
That that is doon, and als it is a peyne,
As ye han seyd, to heere of hevynesse." (VII 2781-7).

By conflating all of the tales that the Monk has told into "a tragedie," the Host evokes the

Monk's imposition of a single meaning and purpose on every work in the genre. And in

criticizing this single meaning by evoking the Monk's own words at the beginning of the

tale, the Host is able to present tragedy as essentially useless.

As mentioned above, the Monk starts his tale by saying: I wol *biwaille* in manere of

tragedie / The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree, / And fillen so that ther nas no

remedie." (VII 1991-4) (emphasis mine). By his own definition, the genre of tragedy

functions as a manner of bewailing things that have no remedy, and at the end of the tale,

he adds that tragedy can *only* bewail the fall of the great at the hands of Fortune. Picking up

on this, the Host acknowledges that the Monk has told a "tragedie," but adds that it is no

"remedie" to "biwaille" that which has already happened. If all tragedy does is bewail, and

all it bewails are things that cannot be fixed, then what is the point of tragedy? Nothing, the

Host concludes.[67] Not only does it not solve the problems it describes, it actively makes its

listeners miserable, for "it is a peyne, / As ye han seyd, to heere of hevynesse" and the tale

"anoyeth al this compaignye." (VII 2786-7; 2789). Thus, the Host concludes that "Swich

talkyng is nat worth a boterflye, / For thereinne is ther no desport ne game." (VII 2790-1).

Reasoning from the little of the text he can remember to what he suspects about the

listeners' feelings, he concludes that tales are worthless if they do not entertain their

[67] As Grudin notes, "In his later reference to the Monk's first words," the Host "misses the generic
sense of 'biwaille' completely and concentrates, instead, on the more literal bewailing of, or
complaining, about something that can no longer be helped," concluding that it is both useless and
"a peyne" to do so. Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, 147. Despite his misunderstanding
of the Monk's generic terms, the Host picks up on the reductive quality of the Monk's definition of
tragedy and uses it as the basis of his own reductive dismissal of the genre.

audience. He goes on to state that not only are such tales void of solace, they also provide

no sentence: for "Whereas a man may have noon audience, / Noght helpeth it to tellen his

sentence." (VII 2801-2).[68] He concludes by assuring the Monk that "wel I woot the

substance is in me, / If any thyng shal wel reported be." (VII 2803-4). If a tale that is not

entertaining loses its audience, then it cannot teach them anything. By the same token, a

tale that entertains its audience, by virtue of being "wel-reported," can allow them to grasp

its "substance." In the Host's interpretation, then, all tragedies are the same, all tragedies

are useless because they can neither entertain nor teach an audience, and therefore, one

ought not to tell them.[69]

The problem is that the Host's genre-based conclusion about the Monk's Tale is not

entirely true. Certainly an entertaining tale may be better at holding an audience's

attention, and a tale full of "desport" and "game" may be more likely to entertain than a

sober one. But the Host promptly disproves his claim that an entertaining tale allows him

to internalize its "substance" when he responds to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, which comes

immediately after the *Monk's Tale* in Fragment VII.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* has plenty of possible lessons that one could derive from it,

many of which the Nun's Priest makes explicit. Towards the end of the tale, for example, he

tells his audience: "Now, goode men, I prey yow herkneth alle: / Lo, how Fortune turneth

sodeynly / The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!" (VII 3402-4). He likewise puts morals in

---

[68] As Strohm notes, the Host's argument that a tale needs an audience to have its full effect was a rhetorical commonplace in medieval discourse. Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 47–48.

[69] The sweeping nature of the Host's conclusions, although couched in the Monk's language of tragedy, also, as Cooper notes, implicate other genres of literature as well: "The Host appears to have excluded so much of literature, and made such demands for what remains, that the next speaker is bound to be in trouble." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 180.

the mouths of his characters, having Chaunticleer state: "he that wynketh, whan he sholde

see, / Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!" and having the fox reply: "God yeve hym

meschaunce, / That is so undiscreet of governaunce / That jangleth whan he sholde holde

his pees." (VII 3431-5). After the animals have given their morals, he goes on to explain:

"Lo, swich it is for to be rechelees / And necligent, and truste on flaterye." (VII 3436-7). And

he concludes by asking that his listeners try to derive a moral from the tale, saying:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
> As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
> Taketh the moralite, goode men.
> For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille." (VII 3438-43).[70]

The Host, however, does not mention a single one of these morals in his response to the

tale, not does he appear to have attempted to formulate any morals of his own. He merely

comments that the tale was "murie" and then begins to compliment the Nun's Priest on his

muscular appearance and speculate about his virility (VII 3447-3460). The only possible

connection between the Host's response and the tale is that the tale's protagonist is a

rooster, and the Host likens the Nun's Priest to a "trede-foul" who lusts after "hennes." (VII

3451-3). So much for his conclusion that he can best absorb the "substance" of a wel

reported" tale (VII 2803-4). Rather, upon hearing a tale he finds entertaining, he abandons

all pretense of analysis and begins to joke around. By criticizing the genre of the *Monk's*

Tale in lieu of analyzing the tale itself, the Host has thus ended up with a "lesson" that is

---

[70] On the unsatisfactory nature of these morals in explaining the tale itself or reducing it to a unitary meaning, however, see: Cooper, 187; Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*, 141–64. See also Jensen's assessment: "Although multiple morals may be consistent with fable tradition, the Nun's Priest does not provide multiple morals but, rather, studiously undercuts each one he does assert." Jensen, "'Winkers' and 'Janglers,'" 189. Even given the inadequacy of the morals, however, the Host makes no effort to derive any "sentence" from this "wel reported" tale, in blatant contradiction to his previous statement.

inaccurate and that he makes no effort to apply in his future readings. Reading exclusively

for genre has allowed him to generate an unhelpful (for him) moral and then banish the

text without thinking deeply about it at all.

Not only can this method of reading be used to generate dismissive morals, it can

also be used to dismiss the text altogether. This can be seen in the Friar's response to the

Wife of Bath's Prologue. In her *Prologue*, the Wife of Bath engages with a variety of textual

authorities in order to justify her multiple marriages, defend her choices, and encourage

other women to dominate their husbands. Having heard her narrative, the Friar responds:

> Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee,
> In scole-matere greet difficultee.
> Ye han seyd muche thyng right wel, I seye;
> But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,
> Us needeth nat to speken but of game,
> And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
> To prechyng and to scoles of clergye." (III (D) 1271-7).

Rather than engaging in debate or discussion with her, the Friar simply comments that this

sort of academic discourse is not appropriate for a pilgrimage: that quoting "auctoritees" is

matter for preaching and for discussion at universities—in other words, for men.[71] By

virtue of her gender, the genres of "sermon" and "academic debate" are closed to her. And

by judging her prologue on the basis of genre in this way, the Friar can not only dismiss it

---

[71] See: Andrew Galloway, "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*: A Generic Excursus," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 14 (1992): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1992.0000.After all, women were barred from university education, and preaching was conventionally regarded as the province of men alone. Alan B. Cobban, *English University Life in the Middle Ages* (London: Univeristy College London Press, 1999), 1, eBook; Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 15–16.For a discussion of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* in light of varied contemporary perspectives on the permissibility of women's preaching and teaching, see: Minnis, 170–348.

but also suggest that the Wife tell no more such tales.[72]

So, too, does the Shipman reject the *Parson's Tale* before he has heard it by declaring that "Heer schal he nat preche; He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche. We leven alle in the grete God . . . He wolde sowe som difficulte, / Or springen cokkel in our clene corn." (II 1179-83). The idea of preaching, to the Shipman, immediately connotes danger: the imposition of problematic ideas that will complicate the "clene" faith of the pilgrims. And while it is possible that his suspicion comes more from the Host's joking allegation that the Parson is a Lollard than a distaste for the genre of sermon, he nonetheless uses an objection to the tale's genre to prevent the Parson from telling it.[73]

The "gentils" of the company do likewise after the Host asks the Pardoner to "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon," replying: "Nay, let hym telle us of no ribaudye! / telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere / Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere." (VI 319-326). Upon hearing that the Pardoner is going to tell a comic tale, the gentlefolk immediately object, on the premise that one can learn nothing morally edifying from a humorous work: it must of necessity be both crass and vacuous.[74] We see, as mentioned above, that the Host brings a similar philosophy to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: he finds it so

---

[72] As Susan Signe Morrison argues, the Friar's rebuke of the wife may be a manifestation of a more general anxiety about the possibility of women (rather than "university educated, Latin-literate males") interpreting texts in an era of increasing vernacularity. Susan Signe Morrison, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Wife of Bath and Vernacular Translations," *Exemplaria* 8, no. 1 (1996): 97–98, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/exm.1996.8.1.97. A rigid perspective on genre thus feeds into and enables an oblique critique of a woman's preaching and a concurrent defense of the social order.

[73] For a thorough analysis of Chaucer's relationship to the discourses of heresy (particularly Lollardy) in his writings, see: Alan J. Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 53–121, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2003.0057.

[74] Their objection might also be based on the fact that the Pardoner wishes to have a drink before he tells his tale, which might lead them to expect it to be ribald like the drunken Miller's *Tale.*

entertaining that he could not possibly take a moral from it, despite the Nun's Priest's repeated encouragements that his listeners do so. The idea that certain forms of literature can contain no moral content reaches its apogee when the Parson dismisses all "fables and swich wrecchednesse," as mere "draf," in contrast to the good "whete" of his sermon, which will present his listeners with "Moralitee and vertuous mateere." (X 34-38).[75]

These genre-based constraints on how works may signify have the effect of limiting readers' abilities to derive varied meanings from varied works: each genre can only do and say certain things in the mouths of certain people. Genre-awareness is essential to interpretation, but when readers' perspectives on genre ossify, they trade hermeneutic ease for complex meaning.

In order to help readers avoid this flawed form of genre-reading, Chaucer offers two partial solutions. Partial, because Chaucer, as is his wont, never explicitly announces that certain approaches to reading are "bad" or others are "good." Nor is any one character a perfectly good or a perfectly bad model. Indeed, it would make little sense if they were. Learning to read more deeply is not as simple as treating a single character as a negative exemplar and then doing the opposite of what they do, for the opposite of "not thinking" is "thinking," and there is no easy shortcut for that. Nor is it as simple as emulating positive models. For while there are characters in the *Canterbury Tales* who offer advice on how to read or who read in a more complex fashion, learning from them is not as simple as directly copying them, for the solutions they propose or practice tend to require a certain degree of

---

[75] As Davenport notes, "Here the horizon of expectation is created by discarding some ideas that are seen as inappropriate"— in this case, those conveyed in fables and alliterative poetry. Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*, 34.

real (and contextually specific) thought to perform.[76] And even characters who read well at some times may read poorly at others. In order to discover and make use of Chaucer's antidotes to hasty reading, one must be already willing to read more carefully—to go beyond the simple and obvious meanings on the surface of the work. For the reader who is willing, however, the *Canterbury Tales* offers some strategies one may use to start.

The first partial solution, suggested by the Wife of Bath, involves readers deliberately expanding their horizons of expectations for what works written in a particular genre can mean and do. Throughout her engagement with her source texts, the Wife of Bath uses genre not only as a means to reject the texts she reads but also as a means to rethink and play with them. In doing so, she is able to reimagine how genres that are critical of women can be turned into something that empowers them. The genres in question are anti-feminist literature and anti-matrimonial literature, and her rejection thereof can be seen vividly when she relates how, wearied from her fifth husband Jankyn's incessant reading from his "book of wikked wyves," she rips three pages from the book and then punches him in the face so that he falls into the fire (III 685; 790-3). Later, through her persuasion, the book itself will end up in the fire, burned by a compliant Jankyn after he hands the reigns of their marriage over to the Wife (III 811-6).

Although she causes the destruction of a generically offensive text, however, the Wife of Bath also thinks critically about the function of the anti-feminist and anti-matrimonial genres. And rather than regarding genre as fixed and static, as the Monk, the

---

[76] See Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 193.

275

Host, the Knight, and the Shipman do,[77] the Wife of Bath uses textual interpretation to explore how these genres can be engaged with and repurposed in a way that is personally empowering for herself and for other women.[78] These genres may seek to "biwaille" the acts of women, but as the Wife of Bath shows, they can also be made to celebrate them.

---

[77] Some have suggested that it is not meant to be the Shipman, but rather the Wife herself who objects to the *Parson's Tale*, on the basis of observations such as the reference the Shipman makes to his "joly body" when announcing his tale, which evokes the Wife of Bath's exuberant sexuality, and the fact that, at the opening of his tale, when discussing wives, he uses the first person plural pronouns "us," "we," and "oure," suggesting that the speaker is a married woman, although the Shipman could also be "mimicking a female speaker." (II 1185; VII 3-19); Patricia J. Eberle, "Explanatory Notes to *The Man of Law's Tale*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 862; J. A. Burrow and V. J. Scattergood, "Explanatory Notes to *The Shipman's Tale*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 910. This has led some to speculate that the Wife of Bath was originally intended to be the teller of the *Shipman's Tale*. If this is the case, this passage could be taken to suggest that the Wife, rather than the Shipman, is guilty of excessive genre-reading. When taken in the light of the Wife's own experiments with genre during her prologue, however, this dismissal of the *Parson's Tale*, if it is understood to be hers, suggests that she is very genre-aware, and uses this awareness tactically, in order to make a space for her tale in the storytelling competition. Indeed, as I will argue, even if she (potentially) displays problems with excessive genre-reading, she also offers an alternative mode of reading based in a broader understanding of how genre can function.

[78] While one could argue (and many have) about whether Chaucer as *author* intended for the Wife of Bath to function as an endorsement of antifeminist views of women, as a protest against them, or as some ambiguous combination of the two, the Wife of Bath's narration presents her (presenting herself, as Leicester notes) as reveling in her criticism of male clerkly authorities, in her tactical manipulation of her husbands, and in her recommendations for women to follow her example. H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 65–67, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1525/9780520341241/html. I base my reading, then, on what the Wife of Bath is depicted as doing with these texts, arguing that regardless of whether she is intended as a defense of women or a critique of them, she is presented as pragmatically defending herself (and women like her) against male domination (albeit with antifeminist language) and giving advice to women more generally through a rethinking of generic texts. I further argue that by presenting these strategies of the Wife's, Chaucer makes them available to his readers as interpretative options. For a small sampling of the criticism on the Wife of Bath's ambiguous status as a pro- or anti-feminist figure, see: Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 26–49, http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2s2004t2/; Arlyn Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," in *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 68–73, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4280477; Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 57–69.

One of the ways the Wife of Bath reworks antifeminist and anti-matrimonial literature is by transforming it from something that men may use against women to something that women can use against men.[79] She does this first by paraphrasing a variety of antifeminist texts and then accusing her first three husbands of believing the sentiments expressed in them. All of the sentiments she selects are insults directed against women or reasons why women make the lives of men miserable. They are the kinds of things that Jankyn will later read to her in an effort to shame her into obedience. Rather than tools to shame women, however, the Wife presents these antifeminist excerpts as fallacious beliefs that men should be ashamed to express. The intent of the genre is to empower men and humiliate women, but the Wife of Bath turns it around so that the same sentiments that ostensibly express female wickedness instead function as evidence of the sordid imaginations of men.[80]

---

[79] Much has been said about the Wife of Bath's tactical repurposing of antifeminist texts and clerkly, masculine discourses, as well as the tensions and ambiguities produced by this appropriation and the question of whether or not it is ultimately successful. While I cannot hope to fully summarize the scholarship on this topic in a limited space, I present here a section of works that offer perspectives on it. See, for example: Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, 72–75; R. W. Hanning, "Roasting a Friar, Mis-Taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7, no. 1 (1985): 16–21, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0000; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 133–131; Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 27–58; Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves Love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman de La Rose and the Canterbury Tales," *Speculum* 58, no. 3 (1983): 656–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/2848963. For an influential study comparing the Wife of Bath's rewriting of masculine texts with Christine de Pizan's own practices in the *Book of the City of Ladies*, see: Susan Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 83–106, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015038902394.

[80] As Leicester puts it: "The compendia of antifeminist lore, like the *Miroir de Mariage* and the other sources of Janekyn's book of wicked wives from which this material is in fact drawn, are meant to provide men with ammunition against women. But there is a sense in which by characterizing women in these ways, men give them license and permission to make what they can of the image

Thus she berates one of her husbands because, as she claims, "Thow seyst we wyves wol oure vices hide / Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe— / Wel may that be the proverbe of a shrewe!" (III (D) 282-4). The idea of a wife hiding her bad qualities until her marriage is one she likely took from the *Roman de la rose* [Romance of the Rose],[81] wherein the figure of Ami [Friend], imitating a jealous husband, tells Amans [the Lover] what jealous men say about married women: "Et quant el veit la chose outree, / Lors primes montre sa malice, / Lors pert s'ele a sus sei nul vice, / Lors fait au fol ses meurs sentir, / Quant riens n'i vaut le repentir."[82] ["Then, when she sees things accomplished, she shows her malice for the first time; then appears every vice that she has; and then, when it will do him no good to repent, she makes the fool aware of her ways."].[83] In her description of a wicked woman who waits until she is married to show her vices, the Wife of Bath directly paraphrases this anti-matrimonial passage. Instead of taking it to heart, however, she insists that her husband is a "shrewe" for believing it.

She does likewise with a critique of wives excerpted from Theophrastus's *Liber*

for their own purposes; and by citing them here in a context that produces a reversal of their ordinary use, the Wife is pointing to her ability to appropriate even antifeminist characterization and turn it back on men to gain the mastery." Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, 72. Whether or not her attempt succeeds as a defense of women, it is certainly a strategy that has yielded her mastery in the past. On the Wife of Bath's display of flexibility about genre and the purposes to which it can be put in her *Tale*, see: Tison Pugh, "Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath's Narrative Violence," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 33, no. 2 (2003): 115–42, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0035.

[81] Christine Ryan Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 868n282-292.

[82] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois, vol. 3 (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1921), 8678–82, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31210001251394.

[83] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 159.

aureolus de nuptiis [Golden Book of Marriage], as preserved in Jerome's *Adversus*

Jovinianum [Against Jovinian] and repeated both in the *Roman de la rose* and Matheolus's

antifeminist, anti-matrimonial tract, *Lamentationes* [Lamentations].[84] In this work,

Theophrastus complains that one does not know a wife's flaws until she is married, saying:

"Equus, asinus, bos, canis, et vilissima mancipia, vestes quoque, et lebetes, sedile ligneum,

calix, et urceolus fictilis probantur prius, et sic emuntur: sola uxor non ostenditur, ne ante

displiceat quam ducatur."[85] ["Horses, asses, cattle, even slaves of the smallest worth,

clothes, kettles, wooden seats, cups, and earthenware pitchers, are first tried and then

bought: a wife is the only thing that is not shown before she is married, for fear she may not

give satisfaction."].[86] Responding to this list, the Wife of Bath accuses her husband of

believing the same thing about wives, claiming:

> Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,
> They been assayed at diverse stoundes;
> Bacyns, lavours, er that men hem bye,
> Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye,
> And so been pottes, clothes, and array;
> But folk of wyves maken noon assay,
> Til they be wedded — olde dotard shrewe! —" (III 285-91).

Imitating Theophrastus's list, she states that her husband is a "dotard shrewe" for

repeating such antifeminist drivel about wives. Rather than revealing a truth about women,

the text is so outrageous that, as the Wife of Bath suggests, to take it seriously implies

---

[84] Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 868n282-292.

[85] Jerome [Eusebius Hieronymus], "Adversus Jovinianum," in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri: Opera Omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 23, Patrologiæ: Cursus Completus (Paris: Excudabat Vrayet, 1845), 1.47, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044012674545.

[86] Jerome [Eusebius Hieronymus], "Against Jovinianus," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., vol. 6 (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1893), 1.47, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175015712220.

outright senility.

It is important to note that the Wife of Bath's husbands, at least husbands 1-3, do not necessarily agree with these works' depictions of women. As the Wife admits to the other pilgrims: "Lordynges, right thus, as ye have undirstonde, / Baar I stiffly myne olde housbondes on honde / That thus they seyden in hir dronkenesse; And al was fals . . . They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve / Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve." (III 379-92). Her elderly husbands are not actually quoting antifeminist texts to her. Rather, she is searching antifeminist works for material to charge them with and then accusing them of heinous beliefs, much as Jankyn searches antifeminist texts for examples of heinous actions and tendencies which he can then use to torment his wife.[87] Jankyn uses the genre as a weapon against women, but the Wife of Bath shows how easily the same commonplaces that target women can be used as a weapon against men.[88]

---

[87] Even though Alisoun of Bath is lying about what her husbands say, her accusations are, as mentioned above, based in established antifeminist conventions, which the weaponizes for her purposes. As Peggy Knapp argues: "all the charges she recites are actually in the anti-female and anti-marriage literature . . . Alisoun is therefore proving her knowledge of the dominant discourse even as she exercises her distance from and control over it. She is turning the male weapons of learning and authority into instruments for her own use." Peggy A. Knapp, "Alisoun Weaves a Text," *Philological Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 390–91, ProQuest. See also Alfred David's contention that "Chaucer satirizes the Wife, but at the same time he exposes the shallowness and cynicism of the antifeminist point of view. It is the senile, self-pitying wisdom of old age, and, even though they have not actually had the courage to take this stand, the Wife's old husbands would be fit spokesmen for it . . . Antifeminist satire is the refuge of the frustrated male ego, taking perverse pleasure in contemplating a scapegoat of its own invention. The Wife deserves some credit for having the wit to fling all the taunts back in the teeth of the enemy and to fight him with weapons forged against her. Out of cautionary tales for husbands she makes a school for wives." Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 146–47, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046392612.

[88] It is interesting to note that the Wife of Bath does not use this tactic with Jankyn himself, despite his earnest espousal of the misogynist beliefs about women with which she falsely charges her prior husbands. Perhaps it is because he is clearly unashamed to repeat these beliefs to her. Indeed, Jankyn is, in many ways, exactly the man she pretends that her other husbands were: an individual who quotes misogynist literature in order to shame his wife into obedience. Against an adversary

The Wife does not only condemn antifeminist and anti-matrimonial texts, however: she also explores the possibilities of drawing inspiration from them. Rather than reading them as they are meant to be read, as *condemnations* of dishonest, domineering, lascivious women, she reads them as *suggestions* for how a woman can better deceive and dominate her husband, as well as satisfy her sexual desires.[89] To this end, she advises other women to listen closely to her narrative so that they may use in their own marriages the insights she has gained from "reading" antifeminist and anti-matrimonial texts.[90]

Hence, she tells them: "Now herkneth how I bar me proprely, / Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde. / Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde, / For half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan." (III (D) 225-228). Here, the Wife of Bath closely paraphrases one of Nature's criticisms of women in the *Roman de la*

so thoroughly committed to a hostile, monolithic conception of the function of the antifeminist genre, the Wife's attempts to repurpose that genre appear futile. Thus, while the Wife of Bath's generic reinterpretation empowers her in certain contexts, it is dependent on the willingness of her listeners to consent to that interpretation: to feel the shame and discomfort she is asking them to feel. When she cannot use her husband's book against him, she is left with no alternative but to destroy it. There is the promise of power in the Wife of Bath's reading, and an authentic testament to the potential of repurposing genre, yet its inefficacy against a man who should be its primary target brings to mind Audre Lorde's contention that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, The Crossing Press Feminist Series (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 106–9, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4401761. See also Patterson, "For the Wyves Love of Bathe," 682.

[89] Indeed, as Arlyn Diamond observes, antifeminist texts do tend to ascribe a certain power to women even as they attack them: "Women's humanity, their drive for autonomy, is reflected in strange form even in medieval anti-feminism, which expresses not the contempt for women's inadequacies we might expect, but fear of their power." Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," 62. While I would argue that anti-feminism expresses both, it is true that the literature displays a distinctive fear of women and their powers. And it is this image of the terrible but powerful woman that the Wife of Bath draws from for inspiration.

[90] On the Wife of Bath as treating her life story as exemplary or educational for other women, see: Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 91; Morrison, "The Wife of Bath and Vernacular Translations," 115; David, *Strumpet Muse*, 146–47.

rose:[91] "Plus hardiement que nus on / Certainement jurent e mentent"[92] ["Certainly they swear and lie more boldly than any man"].[93] Taking this passage to be true would imply a belief that women are bold-faced liars, but the Wife of Bath treats this as an advantage rather than a shortcoming. If women are naturally skilled at lying, she reasons, then they can use this skill in order to gain the upper hand in their marriages and "bere" their husbands "wrong on honde" (III 226). And so she does.

In order to manipulate her husbands even more successfully, she combines this tactic with a strategy inspired by one of Theophrastus's complaints about women's vociferousness.[94] As Theophrastus says of wives:

> Deinde per noctes totas garrulæ conquestiones: illa ornatior procedit in publicum; hæc honoratur ab omnibus, ego in conventu feminarum misella despicior. Cur aspiciebas vicinam? quid cum ancillula loquebaris? de foro veniens quid attulisti? Non amicum habere possims [*Al*. possum], non sodalem[95]

> ["Then come curtain-lectures the livelong night: she complains that one lady goes out better dressed than she: that another is looked up to by all: ' I am a poor despised nobody at the ladies' assemblies.' ' Why did you ogle that creature next door ?' 'Why were you talking to the maid?' 'What did you bring from the market? ' 'I am not allowed to have a single friend, or companion.'"].[96]

Taking an example from this passage, the Wife of Bath imitates the hypothetical wife in Theophrastus by relentlessly asking her husband many of the same questions. And she

---

[91] Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 867n227-28.

[92] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois, vol. 4 (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Édouard Champion, 1923), 18136–37, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31210002970687.

[93] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 301.

[94] Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 867n 235-47.

[95] Jerome, "Adversus Jovinianum," 1.47.

[96] Jerome, "Against Jovinianus," trans. Fremantle, 1.47.

invites other wives to listen closely as she speaks, saying:

> But herkeneth how I sayde:
> 'Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?
> Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
> She is honoured overal ther she gooth;
> I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty clooth.
> What dostow at my neighebores hous?
> Is she so fair? Artow so amorous?
> What rowne ye with oure mayde, Benedicite!
> Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be!
> And if I have a gossib or a freend,
> Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend,
> If that I walke or pleye unto his hous!" (III (D) 234-45).

The goal of her deliberate nagging and lying is to wear down her husbands' resistance so that they comply with her will. Indeed, after her recital of the misdemeanors she charges her husbands with, she boasts: "of o thyng I avaunte me: / Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degree, / By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng, / As by continueel murmur or grucchyng." (III (D) 403-6). The "continueel murmur or grucchyng" that marks a bad wife according to Theophrastus, is, for the Wife of Bath, an effective means to gain power in her relationships.

Finally, she is able to use a condemnation of women's sexuality in order to argue for her own greater autonomy. To do so, she draws, once again, from the *Roman de la rose* and *Lamentationes*.[97] From the *Roman*, she mimics La Vielle [The Old Woman], who says:

> Nus ne peut metre en fame garde
> S'ele meismes ne se garde:
> Se c'iert Argus qui la gardast,
> E de ses cent eauz l'esgardast,
> Don l'une des meitiez veillait
> E l'autre meitié somellait
> . . .
> N'i vaudrait sa garde mais rien.

---

[97] Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 868n357-60.

Fos est qui garde tel mairien."[98]

["No man can keep watch over a woman if she does not watch over herself. If it were Argus who guarded her and looked at her with his hundred eyes, of which one half watched while the other half slept . . . Argus's watch would be worth nothing in this case; the man who guards such an object is a fool."].[99]

She likewise draws from the complaint of Matheolus: "Qui avroit tous les yeulx Argus, / Si y seroit il redargus . . . De son gré se lait femme perdre; / Puis qu'elle consent bien qu'on l'emble, / On ne la puet garder, ce semble"[100] [If one had all the eyes of Argus, even then he would be resisted . . . The woman willingly allows herself to be lost; since she consents that one take her away, it seems one cannot guard her].

Thus the Wife of Bath tells her husband: "Sire olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen? / Thogh thou preye Argus with his hundred yen / To be myn warde-cors, as he kan best, / In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest. / Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee!" (III 357-61). Both the *Roman* and the *Lamentationes* complain about the impossibility of a man keeping a woman from cheating on him. But they also take it for granted, at least in these excerpts, that the ultimate master of her sexuality is the woman herself. They present this as a problem, but the Wife of Bath sees in it an opportunity to assert her autonomy. If nobody can stop her from being unfaithful if she chooses, then the choice is entirely hers. And although she denies having actually cheated on Husband #4, she treats it as her right to go where she will and lust after whomever she pleases (III 484-6; 615-25; 637-9).

By considering the multiple ways in which these genres can work and combining excerpts from different texts, the Wife of Bath is thus able to think more deeply and

---

[98] de Lorris and de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, 1923, 4:14381–94.

[99] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 246.

[100] Matheolus, "Lamentations de Matheolus," trans. le Fèvre, 2.2979-84.

synthetically about genre than the Monk, Host, and Friar. And she gets more out of the reading experience, learning new ways to defend herself and assert her independence. The Host and Monk both fail to consider how tragedy could function as a "remedie" in addition to a means of complaint. But the Wife of Bath, by engaging actively with the generic conventions of anti-matrimonial literature, its critique of wives as wicked, recalcitrant, and dominant, is able to repurpose its complaints as remedies for women's subjection to men. Understanding how genres work and what they can do allows one to discard them, but a more sustained and critical engagement with genre can allow one to explore, debate, and repurpose the texts one encounters.

Not only does Chaucer demonstrate to readers, through the figure of the Wife of Bath, how they may experiment with genre in order to make new meanings of the works they read, he, too, experiments with genre throughout his corpus, producing texts that, because of their mixed or unconventional generic status, defy reduction to a single, genre-based reading.[101] Thus we see a mix of romance and hagiography in the *Man of Law's Tale*[102] and a combination of the sermon and the literary confession in the *Wife of Bath's*

---

[101] Many have noted the ways that Chaucer plays with genre throughout his works. As Caroline D. Eckhardt puts it: "Chaucer's sense of genre begins with the desire to recapitulate many of the literary forms he knew, but . . . his extraordinary tendency to frame, modulate, combine, resist, parody, and otherwise reinterpret his models produces what may be called the creative derangement of genre." Eckhardt, "Genre," 189. In his introduction to the *Canterbury Tales*, Larry Benson likewise comments that Chaucer "transformed every genre he used". Larry D. Benson, "Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 7. The Canterbury Tales itself can be regarded as "a virtuoso display of the narrative kinds that Chaucer knew," and is itself a profoundly generically mixed work. Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*, 33; Eckhardt, "Genre," 191–92.

[102] Larry D. Benson describes this mixed genre as a "secular saint's life" or a "Christian romance." Benson, "Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*," 11.

Prologue.[103] The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is on the surface a beast fable, but it also includes

elements of philosophical debates, exempla, and medical treatises, as well as parodic nods

to the language of tragedy and romance.[104] And within the *Knight's Tale*, "epic and romance

share the narrative space but do not exhaust the options."[105] Even works that seem to

encompass a single genre often diverge significantly from generic conventions. Thus the

Franklin's Tale, ostensibly a Breton lay, centers on marriage rather than the more

conventional topic of courtship.[106] And the *Miller's Tale*, which seems like a straightforward

fabliau, is complicated by its status as a response to the Knight's romance and by the

Miller's choice to introduce the tale as "a legende and a lyf," as though it is a hagiographical

text (I (A) 3141).

In order to interpret these tales, readers cannot simply rely on genre as a guide.

Rather, they must grapple with the challenges posed by the texts' complex and sometimes

contradictory forms of language and registers of meaning. By showcasing the shortcomings

of genre reading while providing texts that are not reducible to simple, genre-based

interpretations, Chaucer thereby challenges his readers to form more complex ideas of

what genre is and can do. And through the *Canterbury Tales* themselves, he gives them

---

[103] In his introduction to the *Tales*, Larry Benson identifies the Wife's prologue as a kind of literary confession, "a dramatic monologue in which the speaker explains, and often defends, his or her sinful way of life." Benson, 11. Lee Patterson contends that the first portion of the Wife of Bath's Prologue resembles a kind of abbreviated *sermon joyeux*, a theatrical genre in which an actor delivers a mock-sermon to the audience. Patterson, "For the Wyves Love of Bathe," 673; Jane Taylor, "Sermon Joyeux," in *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198661252.013.4315.For more on the Wife of Bath as preacher, see: Galloway, "Marriage Sermons."

[104] See: Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*, 8.

[105] Eckhardt, "Genre," 191.

[106] Benson, "Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*," 6–7, 14.

texts to practice on in developing their own reading strategies.

Strategy 2: Label Reading

The second strategy I will discuss bears similarities to genre reading, in the sense that it is based on categorization as a shortcut to meaning. In this approach, however, one categorizes not the genre of the work, but rather the characters and scenarios within it. When reading according to this method, the reader begins by making a note of the social labels that can be applied to the characters in the work, labels like "wife," "husband," "merchant," "miller," "baker," "wise man," "princess," and "queen." Having applied these labels to the characters, the label reader then treats them as highly literal guides for understanding what the text signifies and for whom it signifies. If the label reader has identified that a story contains a character who is a baker, for example, then that reader can take it for granted that whatever this baker does in the story, however this baker is presented, and whatever befalls him, must in some ways constitute a kind of statement *about* bakers in general, or about any individual real-world baker one might encounter. The messages and morals one may derive from this textual baker are likewise relevant primarily to people who are bakers, people who have dealings with them, or people who wish to learn more about them. Deciphering what such a text is saying to or about bakers enables one to conclusively determine what the text means, and for whom. Label-reading can thus function as an effective shortcut to interpretation, by virtue of the way it constrains the range of meanings each person, thing, and event in a story can have for a reader. All a reader must do in order to generate an interpretation of the work is to identify a labeled character, consider how they are portrayed, consider what it would mean if this

depiction was applied to all members of that character's social group, devise a moral based on this depiction, and then accept, reject, or apply it accordingly.

In essence, label-reading can be understood as a kind of simplified, overly-literal approach to the concept of exemplarity, whereby the general truth or moral exemplified by the characters in a tale is always somehow related to the social categories into which those characters can be grouped. In practice, many exemplary tales, by virtue of the context in which they are placed, encourage such literal class-based readings, whereby a single member of a group stands in for the whole. The wicked wives described in anti-matrimonial texts, for example, are never meant to stand for anything other than wicked wives. A legendary king whose story is told in a mirror for princes is going to be an exemplar of kingly behavior, whether good or bad. An immodest women in a conduct book for women must surely be a warning to all women against just such immodest conduct. While every exemplary narrative naturally affords multiple interpretations, and may even encourage them,[107] the class-based reading may, depending upon the context, be the most prudent one. In addition, many genres, and many sub-types of texts within genres, require for their functioning the reader's ability to understand certain conventional character-types and how they signify within such genres. Indeed, the *Canterbury Tales* itself, with its clearly labeled characters and its engagement with the genre of estates satire, in some ways

---

[107] On Chaucer's efforts to call attention to the multiple ways a text may be interpreted, and on the resistance of narrative to moralization, see: Middleton, "Ensamples Mo than Ten," 15, 26–27. On the inherent range of interpretations afforded by exemplary works, in part by virtue of their unpredictable emotional effects on their audiences (and Chaucer's highlighting of this), see: Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 1–26.

demands this kind of reading, although it also complicates it.[108] Assuming a text to have

this kind of direct reference certainly makes it easier to see how to apply the moral of a

particular tale to one's own life.

A beast fable like the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, for example, is utterly unworkable if one

takes it to be a narrative about chickens *qua* chickens. Using the social labels that can be

placed on the characters, however—based on their behaviors, relationships, and the

registers of language used to describe them—one can choose to read it instead as a tale

that is interested in categories of *people*: husbands, wives, knights, ladies, clerks, flatterers,

fools, and dishonest men. Inasmuch as one falls into any of these categories, one might then

take the text as having some relevance to oneself. This might seem like an obvious

example. But recognizing labels can have other benefits. Undertaken in good faith, it can

allow a reader to approach a text with prudent caution, being sensitive to the work's target

audience, the broader social claims it may be making, and how one might need to apply or

---

[108] For the classic study of how Chaucer draws heavily from the tradition and stereotypes of estates literature in crafting the portraits in his *General Prologue*, yet simultaneously creates the impression of the pilgrims' individuality, see: Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the* General Prologue *to the* Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h26t0h427. For a more recent study that treats on this topic, see: John J. McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity: Literary Comparisons in Chaucer and Other Late-Medieval Writing* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Presses, 2000), 21-22. 191-192, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015047535458. McGavin argues that although the "names" of the pilgrims, because they denote social categories, are deliberately chosen to evoke pre-existing assumptions and associations in readers, the particular details of the portraits in the *General Prologue*, placed side by side with conventional descriptions in a particular poetic frame, "create dissimilarities between what is supposedly 'known' about people in these professions and the individual figures in the poem." McGavin, 21. "The name, knight," for example, "has both a past reputation and a present application, and the reader is caught between them, reading dissimilarities and similarities, fashioning and refashioning comparisons between the past and present, the type and the individual, received meanings and discovered ones, the extraliterary contexts of use and the immediate literary one." McGavin, 22. This indeterminacy is heightened by the tales themselves, since it is not clear whether their characteristics are to be attributed to the individual pilgrim narrators or to general ideas about the characteristics of a particular estate. McGavin, 21–22. Even on the meta-level, then, Chaucer's text baffles straightforward or simplistic label reading.

discard the characters' obvious labels in order to make use of it in one's own particular circumstances. And being flexible about labels can allow one to repurpose a moral exemplum in a variety of contexts.

Reading for labels is not, then, in and of itself, a problem. Problems arise, however, when label-reading comes to function as a constraint on analysis: when it is treated not as an aid to a complex, thoughtful reading of a text or as a supplement to other interpretative strategies but rather as an interpretative shortcut or a strict limit on what a text can signify. Pushed to its extremes by a desire for interpretative facility, label reading can come to function as a refusal to engage with the possibility of different potential uses and interpretations of characters and labels.[109] And while enforcing this reading style to the exclusion of others can enable one to weaponize texts (useful if one's goals involve a certain degree of social criticism), becoming overly attached to this reading style can also turn one into a perennial victim, reading attacks into texts even when there are none. It is, in essence, an extreme form of a valid method of extracting moral meaning from tales: a controlling literalism that bears the trappings of critical reading but requires no complexity of thought.

The flaws of excessive label reading as an interpretative method can be seen first, and particularly vividly, in the Reeve's responses to the *Miller's Tale*. Label-reading allows the Reeve to develop an interpretation of the *Miller's Tale* extremely quickly: so quickly, in

---

[109] This refusal to acknowledge the variable ways that signifiers such as names and professions may signify and circulate is one of a number of problems, as Elizabeth Scala argues, in the Reeve's reading method, her interpretation of which contains certain parallels to my own conception of label-reading. Elizabeth Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 100. Indeed, the Reeve's flawed reading practices are an important part of my analysis of what label-reading entails, although I argue that this kind of "misreading' is not exclusive to him, and rather constitutes a more general phenomenon in the *Tales*.

fact, that he only needs to hear a brief summary before deciding that he knows what it means. Before he begins his narrative, the Miller introduces it by providing the barest of plot outlines: "I wol telle a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf, / How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe." (I (A) 3141-3). From this short introduction, one may gather that the Miller is going to tell a tale that contains at least three characters: a carpenter, his wife, and a clerk who tricks the carpenter in some way. One may also derive from this a hint of the tale's genre, albeit in a limited fashion: because it contains trickery and concerns common people, it might be a fabliau, although the description of it as a "legende and a lyf," which evokes hagiographical narratives, muddies the waters a bit.[110] It might very well be a cautionary tale, told more for edification than for humor, or it might simply be intended for entertainment. If one wanted to know more about what kind of tale the Miller intended to tell and what kind of message he sought to deliver with it, one might therefore benefit from listening to it all the way through. Based solely on this rudimentary information, however, as well as his recognition that the Miller is drunk, the Reeve formulates a judgment of the entire tale and its purpose. On the basis of this judgment, he demands that the Miller not tell his tale, stating:

> . . . Stynt thy clappe!
> Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye.
> It is a sinne and eek a greet folye
> To apeyren any man, or him defame,
> And eek to bringen wyves in swich fame.
> Thou mayst ynogh of othere thynges seyn." (I (A) 3144-9)

Despite having heard next to nothing about the story, he has already gathered that it involves trickery of a male character and includes least one wife. Since it is "synne," as he

---

[110] See: Benson, "Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*," 7; Douglas Gray, explanatory notes to *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 842n3141.

says, to defame "any man," as well as to "bringen wyves in such fame," therefore the Miller

should talk about something else.

While these statements of the Reeve's could be read as general precepts about

storytelling decorum (neither of which he follows in his own subsequent tale-telling),[111]

the fact that he treats the tale as defaming "wyves," when only one woman has been

mentioned, is interesting. The assumption seems to be that a tale that depicts one woman

in a negative light must necessarily be read as criticizing all women.[112] The idea that a label

on a character could be incidental rather than central to an interpretation of a text does not

seem to have occurred to him. As it is, by treating labels as essential to meaning, he is able

to interpret and then dismiss the tale without even having heard it.

The Miller, for his part, is quick to encourage the Reeve to read his tale in a different

way. Upon hearing the Reeve's objections, the Miller assures him that just because he is

telling a tale about one unfaithful wife does not mean that he is claiming all wives are

unfaithful. Nor is he making a targeted attack on any married man in particular. Rather, as

he explains: "Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold. / But I sey nat therefore that thou art

oon; / Ther been ful goode wyves many oon, / And evere a thousand goode ayeyns oon

---

[111] Not only does the Reeve blatantly defy his own moral precept by attempting to use his tale to "defame" the Miller, he also, as Elizabeth Scala observes, ends up ironically implicating several other pilgrims in his tale by virtue of the way "His descriptions of his principal characters early in the fabliau uncannily wind up referring to a number of the pilgrims' occupations—not only the Miller, whom his tale is clearly intended to abuse, but also a Wife, a Parson, a Manciple, and two Clerks," as well as obliquely a Nun, Yeoman, and a Knight or Squire. Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*, 101. The incompatibility of the *Reeve's Tale* with his own practice of reading according to labels suggests the myopic self-interest (and questionable value) of his interpretative strategies. As Scala puts it: "One way of going about a more skeptical critical reading of the Reeve and the reading practice he displays is, ironically, to apply it to his own story to see its limitations." Scala, 93.

[112] This failure to distinguish between the single woman and the group is, of course, central to the functioning of misogynist literature in general.

292

badde. / That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde." (I (A) 3152-6). The Miller makes

it clear that in his view, a tale about one unfaithful woman cannot possibly apply to all

women, since the evidence of experience demonstrates that many more women are

"goode" than "badde." By the same token, it cannot possibly apply to all husbands.

Nonetheless, the Reeve persists in reading and interpreting the tale according to its

labels. This can be seen after the tale's conclusion, when Chaucer's narrator relates that

almost everybody in the company enjoyed the tale—except for the Reeve. As the Narrator

explains: "at this tale I saugh no man hym greve, / But it were oonly Osewold the Reve. / By

cause he was of carpenteris craft, / a litel ire is in his herte ylaft; / He gan to grucche, and

blamed it a lite." (I (A) 3859-63). Here we see that the Reeve's anger comes from the fact

that a tale has been told about a person who shares a label with him. As we learn in the

General Prologue, in his youth, the Reeve " hadde lerned a good myster: / He was a wel

good wrighte, a carpenter." (I (A) 613-4). Thus, the label of carpenter that applies to the

character of John in the *Miller's Tale* could also apply to him. More specifically, the Reeve is

angry because the tale is *critical* of a man who shares his label. His subsequent words

clarify his objection: "This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer / How that bigyled was a

carpenteer, / Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon." (I (A) 3193-5). The Miller has told a tale

that contains a carpenter, and therefore the tale must be making a statement about any and

all real-world carpenters, just as it must be making a statement about all wives. And

because the Reeve was trained as a carpenter, then the tale must be making a statement

about him. [113] It is inconceivable that a tale about a man with a particular label would not

---

[113] What the Reeve is doing, Elizabeth Scala argues, is misreading the *Miller's Tale* "through the particularity of its signifiers" by misrecognizing himself in the figure of John the Carpenter on the basis of the signifier of "carpenter" that they share. Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*, 100. As

be targeted at one of the readers in the company who shares that label.[114] And because the carpenter in the tale is foolish and gullible with an unfaithful wife, the Miller must be stating that the Reeve is likewise a dupe and a cuckold.

It is clear from the Reeve's response how profoundly his fixation on label reading has shut down his ability to engage deeply or critically with the tale. He decides what it means before he has heard it, and even after he hears it, the objections he makes are grounded solely in information he could have derived from the prologue. The prologue relates that the tale contains a carpenter who is tricked, and mentioning and reacting to this fact constitutes the entirety of the Reeve's commentary on the tale once it has concluded.[115] For all he has gotten out of it, he might as well not have been listening at all.

Scala puts it, "The Reeve cannot see, in effect, something crucially important to Chaucer's readers: that signifiers (here principally the professions that act as names in the *Canterbury Tales*) operate in various ways and circulate beyond fixed boundaries, hence the number of repeated names in Chaucer's stories that evoke previous figures even as they push matters forward." Scala, 102. This failure (or refusal) to acknowledge the varied ways that signifiers may signify is characteristic of label-reading as I understand it.

[114] The Reeve's assumption that the tale is targeted specifically at himself is rendered stranger when one considers that the Reeve is not the only carpenter in the company, or even the most obvious target for a jab against carpenters. When outlining the members of the pilgrim company in the *General Prologue*, the Narrator mentions a group of guild members, one of whom is explicitly named as a carpenter by trade (I 361-78). Although none of these guildsmen speak over the course of the narrative, the fact that the Carpenter makes no comment on the fabliau, whereas the Reeve reads it as a personal attack, certainly calls attention to the paranoid qualities of the Reeve's reading style. Elizabeth Scala makes a similar observation, remarking: "Should someone be insulted by the Miller's Prologue because it announces his tale will feature a tricked carpenter and what that implies about such craftsmen, it ought perhaps to be *this* Carpenter, whom we have rarely attended." Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*, 94.

[115] I exclude his digression about old men, since it seems to be only tangentially related to the tale, if at all. Certainly it expresses a moral (that old men are weak, dishonest, angry, greedy, boastful, and lustful) that scarcely seems borne out by the work. John the carpenter is old, and he does marry a younger wife, but of all the characters, he is probably the least overtly lustful, he shows no signs of being greedy, boastful, dishonest, or angry, and he is certainly not weak, as evidenced by his hauling three large wooden containers up to the ceiling and fixing them there, as well as building three ladders by hand. The tale does state that he is "jalous" (I (A) 3224), but this is not one of the sins that the Reeve assigns to old men.

The Host of the pilgrim company takes a similar approach in a number of his hasty

textual interpretations, seizing upon a label borne by one of the characters in the work and

using that character's portrayal in order to draw a general conclusion about the real-world

people who bear it. After hearing the *Merchant's Tale*, for example, a narrative in which a

woman named May cheats on her husband (January) with his squire (Damian) and then

tricks January into believing she is faithful, the Host proclaims:

> Now swich a wyf I pray God keep me fro!
> Lo, whiche sleightes and subtilitees
> In wommen been! For ay as bisy as bees
> Been they, us sely men for to deceyve,
> And from the soothe evere wol they weyve;
> By this Marchauntes tale it preveth weel." (IV (E)2420-5).

Having heard a tale about one deceitful woman, he is perfectly willing to read it as a

statement on the perfidy of all women. Indeed, the text "preveth wel" how all women are.

This hasty conclusion, of course, ignores a number of the tale's details, in particular

the wife's primary motive for deceiving her husband, one that is *not* common to all women:

the fact that May is a young woman married to an old man who regards marriage as being

primarily, if not exclusively, for the personal gratification of the husband. Indeed, when

discussing his plans to marry, January pays scant attention to the idea that his wife might

also find marriage pleasurable. While some of his general statements about marital bliss

could be taken to apply to both partners, the majority of his focus is on what marriage can

do for *him*: how a wife might gratify his lust, provide him with heirs, and allow him to live

in ease (IV 1393-96, 1431-40, 1263-65, 1627-30, 1642-47). When considering sexual

activity, he is likewise heedless of his wife's needs, regarding sex as something that brings

pleasure to a man but discomfort to a woman. Indeed, January evidently believes that sex

will be unpleasant for his wife, as he calls it a "trespace" and states that he will "greetly

offende" her (IV 1829). Despite his qualms, however, he is unwilling to moderate his

behavior, saying: "God forbede that I dide al my myght!" (IV 1761). In the end, May's

pleasure and pain are irrelevant to him, and his disregard for her feelings provides a

possible motive for her affair, as does her distaste for her husband's body. The tale dwells

at length on January's unpleasant physical traits when he is making sexual advances

towards May, describing how he rubs his "unsofte" beard, likened to sharkskin and briars,

against May's "tendre face" when he kisses her, and how the "slakke skyn aboute his nekke

shaketh" when he sings in bed (IV 1824; 1849). While the tale is never explicit regarding

May's feelings for her husband, it strongly implies that she is unhappy, as the Merchant

relates: "God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte, / Whan she hym saugh up sittynge

in his sherte, / In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene; / She preyseth nat his pleyyng

worth a bene." (IV 1851-4). Considering that January has repeatedly referred to sex as

"pleye," the fact that May does not compliment him here is telling (IV 1835; 1841). Her

implied distaste for her husband's body and displeasure with his sexual performance

function as two potential, very particular reasons for her adultery, all of which the Host

ignores in his reading.[116]

---

[116] Arlyn Diamond offers a similar assessment of the situation: "The grotesque and unlovable figure of January on his wedding night might seem sufficient to vindicate any infidelity, but the tale goes beyond mere physical disgust: January is not simply a dirty old man; he is also the spokesman for a naive and egocentric view of marriage . . . A wife for him is an object designed solely for a man's personal gratification." Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," 77. Diamond, however, considers this sympathetic portrayal of May to be mitigated by the later portrayal of her as manipulative and unlikable. Diamond, 78. Indeed, May is in many ways a callous and conniving character, as Jill Mann observes, complicating a view of her as a stereotype of wifely perfection (as January sees her) or as a stereotypical victimized woman (as the reader might be tempted to see her). Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 55–56. The Host is not wrong to read her harshly. Where he does go wrong is in generalizing from her to all women. Regardless of how one views May, it is clear that the tale is nowhere near as unambiguous as the Host would make it, and the unpleasant particularity of May's circumstances and of her character, as well as the question of whether she

Besides ignoring May's motives, the Host also neglects to notice the emphasis the text places on the perfidy of Damian, whom the narrator addresses as "O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth! / O famulier foo, that his srevyce bedeth! / O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe, / Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewe, / God shilde us alle from youre aqueyntaunce!" (IV (E) 1783-7). While the Host is under no obligation to read Damian in this way, it certainly complicates his notion that women spend all of their time deceiving "sely" men, when the tale contains a man who is perfectly happy to deceive another man himself.

Not only does the Host's conclusion, like the Reeve's, ignore key elements of the tale, it is also inaccurate to his own life, as evidenced not only by its status as a ludicrously sweeping generalization, but also by the Host's subsequent discussion of his wife. Following his conclusion about the tale, he states: "But doutelees, as trewe as any steel / I have a wyf, though that she povre be, / But of hir tonge, a labbyng shrewe is she, / And yet she hath an heep of vices mo" (IV (E) 2426-9). It would make sense that, if the Host is taking from the text a generalization that applies to all women, it could be applicable to any given woman. But it is clear that the Host's wife, whatever else she may be, is not such a woman. The Host himself suggests this disjunction when he follows his description of women's wiles with the phrase: "But doutelees, as trewe as any steel / I have a wyf."[117] If

---

was always like this or if January drove her to it, is precisely what the Host is unwilling to engage with.

[117] As Tara Williams argues, by mentioning that Goodelief is "trewe as any steel," the Host suggests a contrast between her and May, although, as she acknowledges, "'Trewe as any steel' may be sarcastic or earnest; it holds those two opposed readings in tension." Tara Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities in the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 4 (2008): 386, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25094411. The ambiguity of this moment nonetheless "raises more

Goodelief, for all her flaws, is true as steel, then this would imply that the Host's previous

moral about women is somewhat limited. Rather than elaborating on this inconsistency,

however, he follows this concession with another "but," assuring his listeners that although

his wife is not deceptive, she still is obnoxious and laden with vices.

The specific terms the Host uses to describe her nonetheless continue to work

against his stated moral. He complains of the "sleights and subtiilitees" women use to

"deceive" men, but it is hard to imagine a less subtle woman than his wife, based on his

descriptions of her. Indeed, he proceeds to label her a "labbyng shrewe"; far from relying

on slyness and deception, she will not stop talking about what she wants the Host to do for

her (IV (E) 2438). And although the Host declares that "she hath an heep of vices mo"

which he has not and will not mention, none of the vices he does mention seem consistent

with the conclusions he draws from the tale (IV 2429). Everything he says about his wife

as a particular person contradicts the moral he has expressed about dishonest women

based on a shared label. Even though Goodelief, as the Host describes her, seems to

conform to a number antifeminist stereotypes, it is clear that she does not fit with all of

them.[118] Thus the Host's hasty moral, as it stands, does not accurately reflect his life.

We can see, here, the possibility for the Host to think deeper about the text, to

---

complex possibilities for wifehood: many wives may be deceptive, but others may be true and most
will be a mixture of virtues and vices." Williams, 386.

[118] Williams concludes that the Host's combination of ambiguous praise and antifeminist
stereotypes when describing his wife "leave Goodelief on a middle ground . . . Based on the available
evidence, she seems to fall at the center of the spectrum of wifehood that the *Canterbury Tales*
offers: she has the tongue of the Wife of Bath without the powerful deception of May or the extreme
patience of Griselda." Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities," 386. Williams also
questions the completeness of the Host's portrait of Goodelief, based in part on its stereotypical
nature. Williams, 386. Since it is only through his descriptions that her character is mediated to us,
however, I choose to take his complaints, although surely hyperbolic, as more or less valid.

nuance his initial reading by considering the ways in which his wife does not fit with the "lessons" he has taken from the tale—indeed, he begins to do so with his "trewe as steel" comment, if it is taken to be earnest. Rather than reflecting further, however, he instead expresses his desire to have done with the topic, states that he regrets his marriage on account of his wife's vices, and finishes by saying that he will not list these vices because somebody in the pilgrim company (presumably the Wife of Bath) will surely relay this information back to her.[119] Even if the Host's plans were not cut off by his fear of rumormongering, it seems apparent his intent is to enumerate his wife's flaws, rather than consider the flaws of his moral. This is, in fact, precisely what he does after hearing the tale of *Melibee*, before once again cutting himself off.[120] The neatness of his label-based moral about women has, in essence, absolved him from thinking more about the details of the tale, or of the lesson he has drawn from it. Having dispensed with these things, he is free to launch into criticism of his wife or to "Lat alle swiche thynges go" (IV 2430).

The Host behaves similarly after hearing the *Shipman's Tale*, concluding on the basis of a single character (a dishonest monk who tricks a couple into giving him sex and money) that one ought to distrust all monks. Thus he declares: "A ha! Felawes, beth ware of swich a jape! / The monk putte in the mannes hood an ape, / And in his wyves eek, by Seint Austyn! / Draweth no monkes moore unto youre in." (VII 439-42). As before, this conclusion

---

[119] On the traditional application of the Host's "somme of this meynee" to the Wife of Bath, see: M. Theresa Tavormina, "Explanatory Notes to *The Merchant's Prologue* and *Tale*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 890n2436-38; Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities," 387.

[120] As Barbara Page notes: "Repeatedly in the links the Host, set off by something in a tale, begins to reflect upon his own life or simply takes up a distressing consideration only to dismiss it abruptly from his mind. The subject of marital relations is most likely to bring this reaction." Barbara Page, "Concerning the Host," *The Chaucer Review* 4, no. 1 (1969): 4, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093103.

glosses over vast portions of the text, neglecting to take into account reasons why that

particular monk, like the *particular* wife in the *Merchant's Tale*, was able to do what he did,

and why. And it leaves the Host with a patently silly moral, especially for a man who has

derived financial benefit from allowing monks (or at least the Monk in the pilgrim

company) into his own inn.

As can be seen from the example of the Host and the Reeve, then, treating labels as

the key to the meaning of a text can give one a quick and convenient reading, but one that

comes at the expense of reflection on the specifics of the text.[121] Not only does such an

approach facilitate a hasty and shallow engagement with the material one reads, it can also

hinder critical thinking about a text by turning it into a kind of weapon—one that can be

used by or against the reader. For if one reads a text as though it is making a statement

about real people based on its labeled characters, then one can use that text as a basis for

criticism of real-world groups or individuals, trading insight about the self for easy attacks

on others, as the Host does. And if one encourages others to read in this way, one can use a

text as a weapon against them, quelling analysis in favor of sowing hostilities. Under this

method of interpretation, texts are quickly transformed from repositories of meaning to

vehicles for ad hominem attacks.

---

[121] On the topic of the shallowness of the Host's commentary on the tales he hears, Cynthia C. Richardson remarks: "Harry Bailly's major lack as a critic is in what he does not say, the perceptions he does not have, the ideas he does not examine. Although we usually agree with his observations, we see that he accepts or rejects out of hand, instinctively, as when he misses part of the point in his comments on *Physician's Tale* and on the *Shipman's Tale*. His faults in the face of art, like those of Chaucer's audience, are not so much lack of instinctive taste or accuracy as lack of depth." Richardson, "The Function of the Host in The Canterbury Tales," 333. While I disagree with her contention that one generally agrees with the Host's commentary, as well as with her contention that the Host is not practicing a form of literary criticism in his responses to the text, I do agree with the idea that the Host's main failing, the thing that makes him such a flawed reader, is that he settles for superficial interpretations rather than taking the time to examine the messy details of the tales he hears. Richardson, 331–33.

We see the Reeve doing so following his response to the *Miller's Tale*. Having

concluded, on the basis of shared labels, that the Miller is targeting him personally, the

Reeve decides to tell a tale that, if it is interpreted in terms of its labels, will constitute a

clear attack on the Miller. Indeed, he tells the Miller: "ful wel koude I thee quite / With

blerying of a proud milleres ye, / If that me liste speke of ribaudye." (I (A) 3864-5). By

telling a tale in which *a* miller is tricked, he intends to strike back at *the* Miller in the

company. And in order to encourage the pilgrims to read his tale in the way he desires, the

Reeve announces: "'I pray yow alle that ye nat yow greve, / Thogh I answere, and somdeel

set his howve; / For leveful is with force force of-showve. // 'This dronke Millere hath

ytoold us heer / How that bigyled was a carpenteer, / Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon. /

And, by youre leve, I shal hym quite anoon; / Right in his cherles termes wol I speke. / I

pray to God his nekke mote to-breke;" (I 3910-8). The Reeve clearly announces how he has

read the *Miller's Tale* and why it offends him. Therefore, he vows to retaliate in kind: to

show "force" in response to force. In his own words, he is likening tale-telling to a form of

violence. And this impression of violence is enhanced when he couples his threat of textual

force with the hope that the Miller will break his neck. By performing a label reading on the

Miller's Tale, he has avoided engaging with it in its own right. By reading it in terms of its

labels, he has turned it into a weapon.[122] And by indicating that he wants his own tale to be

read in the same way, he is encouraging others to do as he does: to read and interpret in

the most superficial and hurtful way possible.

Indeed, if his readers do read the tale, as he wishes them to, exclusively as an attack

on the Miller or millers, they run two particular kinds of risks. If they take this moral to

---

[122] As Helen Cooper comments: "The Reeve, like the Friar and Summoner later, uses fiction as an anti-personnel weapon." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 116.

heart, considering millers to be greedy fools, then they become tools of the Reeve, inveigled

into sowing discord among the pilgrim company. In contrast, if they reject this hostile

moral, using it as an excuse to discard, as the Reeve does, both message and tale, then they

shut themselves off from other interpretative possibilities—ways they could read against

the Reeve by finding other morals in his story.[123] And while shutting out a tale in this way

may be a valid self-protective maneuver, it can also function as a refusal to entertain

alternative textual interpretations.

  We can vividly see both the self-protective elements of this reading method and

some of its drawbacks in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. That the Wife of Bath uses

this method for protection from hostile readings is clear in her retelling of the struggles she

had with her fifth husband. Jankyn, as the Wife of Bath relates, is initially very controlling,

and he takes particular exception to her tendency to walk from house to house, visiting and

gossiping with her neighbors. He intends to rid her of this habit, and the way he attempts to

do so is by telling her stories about women and wives: in particular, stories where wives

behave badly and harm their husbands. His intention appears to be for his wife to interpret

these texts in terms of their labels and change her behavior accordingly. In essence, she will

see that the women in the texts are behaving badly, draw general conclusions about

---

[123] Luckily, perhaps, for the Pilgrim company, many of its members display a marked disinclination to interpret texts as they are asked to, or at least in the way that their tellers intend (see Mitchell's observation that what we see in the Tales is "evidence of exemplary morality repeatedly going unheeded" Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 82.). Thus the Cook, upon hearing the Reeve's Tale, laughs at the way the miller in the tale is tricked, commenting that he has never heard "a millere bettere yset a-werk." (I 4336-7). This would seem to consitute the "solaas" of the tale for him: the thing that he finds funny about it. When it comes to interpreting the "sentence" of the tale, however, he ignores the Reeve's intentions and states: "wel seyde Salomon in his langage, / 'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous,' / For herberwynge by nyghte is perilous. / Wel oughte a man avysed for to be / Whom that he broughte into his pryvetee." (4330-4334). While one might not expect the drunken Cook to be a good reader, he has ended up with a workable general moral that responds practically to the plot of the tale and treats its characters as examples that a wider range of people, not only millers, may follow.

women's behavior and its consequences from these texts, and then apply these lessons to herself by virtue of the fact that she shares with the characters the labels of 'woman" and "wife."[124]

Thus, Jankyn relates "How he Symplicius Gallus lefte his wyf, / And hire forsook for terme of al his lyf, / Nought but for open-heveded he hir say / Lookynge out at his dore upon a day" (III (D) 643-6). He follows this by telling the Wife of Bath about another man who left his wife because she went to "a someres game / Withouten his wityng" (III (D) 648-9). And he cites a passage of Ecclesiasticus forbidding men from letting their wives wander, following it with a rhyme which says men who let their wives go on pilgrimages deserve to die (III (D) 655-8). Rather than simply telling her not to go, he tells her stories of other women who leave the home—and other men who let them, with the goal that the Wife will interpret these narratives according to their labels and see their indictments of wayward wives as indictments of herself.

The Wife, for her part, does exactly this. She listens to these texts, recognizes the labels that can be applied to the women in them, and interprets them as making a statement about women's vices that could be applied to all women, including herself. What she doesn't do, however, is change as a result of this understanding. Rather, like the Reeve, she uses label reading as a self-protective means to reject the texts without contemplating them further. Thus, she says his efforts were "al for noght, I sette not an hawe / Of his

---

[124] Comparing Alisoun of Bath to Pertelote in the Nun's Priest's Tale, Jean E. Jost remarks that: "They as nonliterate readers nevertheless perceive their husbands' calculation, of rehearsing a text aloud to place them within it in a pejorative role. The husbands presume their wives will recognize their mirror image in the text, and thereby be chastened." Jean E. Jost, "Chaucer's Literate Characters Reading Their Texts: Interpreting Infinite Regression, or the Narcissus Syndrome," in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 204.

proverbes n'of his olde sawe, / Ne wolde I nat of hym corrected be. I hate hym that my vices

telleth me, / And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I." (III (D) 659-63). She understands that

Jankyn is telling tales about the vices of particular wives in order to make a statement

about her own failings as a wife. Having recognized this, and acknowledged Jankyn's

message, however, she simply discards it. She knows that she has vices, but she sees the

benefit of having them, recognizes that the tale-teller is trying to manipulate her, and

therefore refuses to change. Label-reading, far from being the means of moral conversion

that Jankyn considers it, is what allows her to understand his aims and then quickly

dispense with the tales he tells. This could be regarded as yet another way of shutting down

the process of textual interpretation, but given the Wife's knowledge of the intentions of

the tales' teller, her decision is a pragmatic and politic one. She knows full well how stories

can be levied for power, and she is far too skilled and self-aware a reader to let stories told

in bad faith be used to exert power over her.[125] So while her defense does rely on the ways

in which label-reading can be used to cut short the reading process, it also shows the

benefit that can come from tactically refusing to engage with overtly hostile texts.

By presenting the results of this approach to reading for multiple characters in

multiple contexts, Chaucer displays vividly how it can function as a tempting intellectual

trap, as well as a weapon of attack that can be used by or against the reader. But he also

shows how it can function as a shield to protect one from hostile texts and hostile tellers. In

---

[125] It is generally accepted in the scholarship on the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* that Alisoun and Jankyn's struggle over the book of wicked wives represents, and plays a key part in, a larger power-struggle between them, the stakes of which include, among other things: control of their marriage, normative gender roles, and interpretative and interpersonal authority more generally. For a small sampling of works that discuss this topic, see: Jost, 204–7; Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 126–28; Hanning, "Roasting a Friar, Mis-Taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," 16–20.

presenting the results of this reading method without any clear injunctions either to use or eschew it, he leaves it up to his readers to assess its benefits and drawbacks and to decide, like the Wife of Bath, if they will strategically in their own approaches to texts. If they want to learn from what they read, then relying exclusively on this method will hinder that process. But if they want to use it as a stepping stone to more complex analysis, or as a defense against manipulators like Jankyn or the Reeve, then it is available to them as a legitimate reading option. In the next section, after analyzing a final interpretative approach that is closely-linked to label-reading, I will discuss how Chaucer suggests ways for his readers to move beyond simplistic label-reading and to turn it into something they can use.

Strategy 3: Lessons for Others (Redirecting Relevance)

Label-reading can also feed into a final approach to a text that can allow a reader to quickly dismiss it: deciding that the text does have a message, but that it is a message for someone else. In this approach, upon diagnosing who would benefit most from the text, and possibly even articulating the lesson this other person should take from it, the reader ceases to analyze the text altogether.

On the most basic level, a form of this pragmatic analysis must necessarily be undertaken by any storyteller, writer, or preacher selecting from their mental stock of exemplary tales in order to educate an audience. Consideration of one's audience and how to reach them is, after all, a central rhetorical skill.[126] We can see Chaucer applying this

---

[126] As Paul Strohm notes, the common rhetorical notion, expressed in a variety of medieval treatises on preaching, that " that discourse assumes its full significance—perhaps its only significance—in interaction with an audience has certain corollaries, one of which is that artists

principle in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, where he modifies his language to be more

accessible to his son, Lewis.[127] And one can see how the ability to negotiate between text

and context, whether by choosing a fitting tale for a particular occasion or considering how

a tale might apply to one's own life, can be a valuable practice for a reader as well as for a

writer.[128] This is, after all, the art of *phronesis*—of prudent application of past experience to

one's own present circumstances.[129] Practice in applying texts to others may well allow one

to practice applying them to oneself.

Problems arise, however, when the one who reads and uses these exempla is happy

to hold the "mirror" up to others but is reluctant to glance into it themselves. This approach

to reading and storytelling, if it is used too often, with each reader passing the

responsibility for moral improvement to another person, can lead to ethical stagnation.

Indeed, what Chaucer highlights through the behavior of readers and storytellers like the

Host, the Friar, the Summoner, and the Pardoner is the way the pretense of reading in

order to find material to educate others can become a way to avoid responsibility for one's

---

should not simply hope for good audition but should shape their discourse with the needs and
capacities of an intended audience in view." Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 48.

[127] Geoffrey Chaucer, "*A Treatise on the Astrolabe*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson,
3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 19–64.

[128] Indeed, according to Mitchell, it is readers' personalized application of a moral in their own lives
that allows exempla to do ethical work. And in discovering the moral "point" of the text, the reader
may develop a use for it that is "highly personalized, adapted to individual circumstance, relative to
time and place." Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 17–20.

[129] See Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 16–18. See also Carruthers' assertion that
"Rhetorically conceived, ethics is the application of a *res* or generalized content (most often
expressed in a textual maxim) to a specific, present occasion *which is public in nature*, because it
requires an audience . . . rhetoric does not normalize an occasion, it occasionalizes a norm." Mary J.
Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1990), 180–81.

own learning and improvement.[130] And labels, applied selectively, can make it all the more easy for a reader both to devise a hasty interpretation and push the responsibility for this interpretation onto somebody else.

We see the Host reading in this way on multiple occasions in the *Tales*. After hearing the *Clerk's Tale*, for example, in which a patient woman named Griselda has her loyalty and obedience repeatedly and cruelly tested by her husband, Walter, the Host comments: "Me were levere than a barel ale / My wyf at hoom had herde this legende ones!" (IV (E) 1212c-d). While his words could be interpreted as a simple wish to share this tale with his wife, we learn later that what the Host actually wants is for her to emulate the patient Griselda. This can be seen in his response to the *Tale of Melibee*, a story of a woman named Prudence who, following an attack on her daughter, persistently counsels her husband Melibee to refrain from seeking revenge. Upon hearing this tale of another patient wife, the Host's response is similar to his response to the *Clerk's Tale*, albeit with added clarification: "I hadde levere than a barel ale / That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herde this tale! / For she nys no thyng of swich pacience / As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence." (VII 1893-6). Because his wife is not patient like Prudence, the Host wishes she would listen to the tale, presumably so that she can learn from Prudence how other wives should act. As Helen Cooper aptly puts it: "The Host, with his usual critical perversity, reacts to the *Melibee* as if it were an exemplary tale in the literal mode, with Prudence as the model of what a wife ought to be — which is everything his own wife is not."[131]

---

[130] As Mitchell makes clear, in order for exemplary texts to serve an ethical function, one has to apply the lessons one derives from them. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 17.

[131] Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 176. In the Host's defense, as Lee Patterson notes, reading the tale as a lesson for wives was not necessarily beyond the pale: "As the evidence of

After having expressed this wish, the Host goes on to describe in detail his wife's

anti-social behavior, presenting her as a sort of anti-Prudence. Whereas Prudence advises

her husband against violence, Goodelief encourages the Host to beat his knaves even

harder (VII 1897-1900). Rather than counsel against vengeance, as Prudence does,

Goodelief uses her husband as a tool to take revenge on others. Indeed, any time that one of

her neighbors displeases her, she storms home and shouts insults at her husband until he

goes out to fight the offending neighbor, to the point that the Host is afraid she will

eventually talk him into killing somebody (VII 1901-18).[132] And whereas Prudence

counsels Melibee in favor of wisdom, the Host's wife bullies him into acting "fool-hardy"

(VII 1916).

While these comparisons do show that Goodelief could learn a thing or two from

Prudence, they do not address how the Host himself could learn something new from the

tale.[133] Rather than finding a lesson for himself, the Host sees in the tale only a confirmation

---

manuscript provenance shows, this is a not uncommon medieval misreading: it was certainly shared by the Menagier de Paris and probably by those scribes or readers who included Renaud's translation in collections designed for the education of young women." Patterson, "'What Man Artow?,'" 156. The Host is not the only label reader or redirector of relevance.

[132] As Cooper puts it: "If Prudence fights for peace with massed ranks of proverbs, Goodelief takes a more concrete line of argument:" fetching staves for her husband to beat his knaves with Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 176.

[133] Many critics have commented on the Host's interpretative limitations here. See, for example: Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 193, 198; Patterson, "'What Man Artow?,'" 156; Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 189, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005411330. For a rare contrasting reading that sees the Host's acknowledgement of the work's potential benefits for his wife more positively, as a valorization of women's reading and of the possibilities for women to effect positive changes as a result of their reading, see: Madeleine L. Saraceni, "Chaucer's Feminine Pretexts: Gendered Genres in Three Frame Moments," *The Chaucer Review* 51, no. 4 (2016): 419–27, https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.51.4.0403. Critics have also noted that the Host neglects to consider potential *similarities* between Goodelief and Prudence, such as the dominion they exert

of what he already knows: that his wife is not a kind or patient woman.[134] Why does the

Host read in this way? It is possible that he simply finds it easier to see faults in others than

to grapple with his own. But it may also have something to do with his tendency to read

texts in terms of their labels. For if the meaning of a text is to be understood as inextricably

linked to the social roles it depicts, then how can a female character have anything to teach

the male Host? How can a husband learn anything from a wife? Given the hermeneutical

restrictions of label-reading, it is easy to see how the Host might miss a lesson

communicated through a character who is externally unlike him.[135] Because Griselda is a

over their husbands. See, for example: Palomo, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*," 136; Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 189.

[134] As Gaylord puts it in his classic analysis of the Host's role as editor, Harry Bailly has a marked tendency to relate what he reads to himself and to use it to confirm what he already knows: "When Harry reacts to a story he never treats it as a thing-in-itself; it serves rather to mirror his own likes and dislikes, or to point to something which is already known. He is a realist, a literalist, and a materialist, by practice, if not by profession. He expects to hear about real toads in real gardens; he is most pleased if it turns out the toads and the gardens belong to someone he knows, and if what is said about them confirms what he had always thought about gardening. To the extent that the stories remind him of familiar things he is willing to respond with familiar emotions." Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales," 232. Allen, like Saraceni, is inclined to regard the Host's interpretation here more positively, as a kind of personalization and phronesis on the part of the Host, whereby he pushes against the first, Petrarchan moral the Clerk provides (that Walter is to be read as a figure for God and Griselda as the human soul). In doing so, the Host, as Allen argues, asserts "the value and historical specificity of readers who, refusing to submit to the author's terms, apply the story to their own circumstances. In contrast to Petrarch's academic readers, the Host invokes his own marital experience to make sense of the otherwise impenetrable constancy of Griselda." Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truths*, 20. While I agree that the Host's attempts to personalize the material are ethically positive, he does not, I would argue, go far enough in interpreting the work in a way he can *use*. In essence, he takes the first steps towards personalizing the text and making ethical use of it, but he stops before he can go any further, "passing the buck" to his wife and identifying moral improvement as her problem, rather than his.

[135] *Externally* unlike, because as Tara Williams notes, in constructing imagined and antagonistic communities of husbands and wives through their complaints about their spouses, the husbands of the *Canterbury Tales* actually end up revealing the parallels between their frustrations and those of their spouses, as well as the parallel ways they construct themselves as communities. Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities," 379–401. Indeed, she argues that in ventriloquizing his wife's complaints against himself, the Host reveals that Goodelief is also dissatisfied with their marriage, and thus both contributes to the storytelling that constructs husbands and wives as

wife, then, she may have a lesson for married women, but not for men like the Host.[136] The

same is true for Prudence, whom the Host characterizes purely as a figure whose example

speaks to other wives. Perhaps he could learn a lesson from the husbands in the tales, but

while their labels would allow this, he does not appear to see anything in them that

interests him.[137]

Were the Host to look beyond labels, or dare to look inward, however, he might

discover something of actual value to him in the text. For example, he might gain some

insight from trying to learn from the *women* in the tales. Comparing the Host to Griselda,

---

separate communities and indicates parallels between himself, Goodelief, and the Wife of Bath, who
likewise complains about her spouses. Williams, 401. If the Host were to look beyond labels, he
might find that there is much in the stories of long-suffering wives that might resonate with him as
a suffering husband.

[136] In her analysis of the Host's responses, Saraceni regards the Host's sense that the tale is for
women as understandable, and perhaps even "culturally correct," because the tale of Prudence and
Melibee was, as mentioned above, included in compilations designed to educate women. Saraceni,
"Chaucer's Feminine Pretexts," 427. Chaucer's source for the tale of Prudence, for example, the *Livre
de Mellibee et de Prudence* by Renaud de Louens, was dedicated to the writer's wife, and the tale
was present in a conduct book for women, the Ménagier de Paris. Saraceni, 424–27. Thus, the Host
is accurately identifying the work as an exemplum relevant for female readers. This genre-
awareness, however, also suggests limitations in the Host's reading, such as the idea that a work *for*
women, while it might benefit men by improving the women around them, has nothing to directly
teach a man.

[137] One could, as Williams does, see the Host as identifying with Walter, but I would argue that
nothing about his commentary suggests that he sees himself in this figure: his focus is purely on
Griselda as wife. Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities," 393. Indeed, as much as
the Host uses labels to pass the responsibility for interpretation off onto his wife, he also does not
give a great deal of scrutiny to those who share a label with himself, perhaps because he is only
willing to generalize about those who are "other." This can lead to a comical refusal to see
implications for himself in a narrative. As Marion Turner comments: "Harry Bailly reads 'Melibee'
as a tale for women, with the moral of encouraging women to be patient, and contrasts his
aggressive wife with Prudence. The irony is supreme—the reader cannot avoid seeing the
similarities between these two dominating women, and the similarities between the two angry men
(Melibee and Harry). Yet Harry refuses to read the tale as applicable to him, as relating at all to his
own aggression." Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 189. The Host's label-reading is selective and self-
interested, as, in practice, is the label-reading of the Reeve and of Jankyn. Indeed, the inconsistency
with which the Host applies this method makes it clear how much a desire to avoid interpretative
challenges has corrupted his reading methods. And it might, ideally, make readers think twice about
how they are using their own.

for example, we see some small elements of similarity. For while Griselda is not loud and bombastic as the Host is, she does submit herself to the will of a cruel spouse, much as he does with his own wife. It is possible that by looking at her as an example, then, the Host could learn a lesson about the consequences of excessive submission: how when one spouse will not stand up against the will of the other, it can leave them bereft not only of agency but of the people that they love. For the Host, who says of his wife that he "dat nat hire withstonde," the message is deeply relevant (VII 1920).

So, too, might the Host derive a more positive model from Prudence, the spouse who takes a stand against violence and refuses to be cowed. While it is not possible to know just how much agency the Host really has in his relationship with his wife, or how realistically he could emulate Prudence, it is nonetheless possible that she could function as an aspirational model for him, were he willing to overlook gender in his consideration of the text. Regardless of the possibilities, however, the Host contents himself with locating lessons for his wife in these texts without taking any for himself.

Jankyn, for his part, acts similarly, deluging Allison of Bath with tales of wives who hurt their husbands while ignoring the idea that he, himself, may be wrong to hurt her. Among the proverbs he recites to his wife is that statement that is it better "hye in the roof abyde, / Than with an angry wyf doun in the hous; / They been so wikked and contrarious, / They haten that hir housbondes loven ay." (III 778-81). Here, he refers to the wickedness of angry women who hate everything their husbands love. And yet we learn that Jankyn himself hates the things that his wife loves. For example, the Wife of Bath describes how "often tymes I to my gossyb wente, / For evere yet I loved to be gay, / And for to walke in March, Averill, and May, / Fro hous to hous, to heere sondry talys—" (III 544-7). She loves

311

walking from house to house and gossiping, yet this is the very behavior that Jankyn has

"sworn" she will not perform (III 640). And Jankyn sets himself in opposition to her other

desires as well, for as Allison complains: "He nolde suffre nothyng of my list." (III 633).

Jankyn's persistent antipathy for the things Alisoun likes makes him sound suspiciously

like the "wikked and contrarious" wives who constantly "haten that hir housbondes loven"

(III 780-1). And Jankyn, like the proverbial angry wife, is himself wrathful, for when

Alisoun does not obey him and persists in visiting her friends, she relates that "This made

hym with me wood al outrely" (III 664). Were Jankyn to overlook the label of "wife," he

might find much in his book of "contrarious" spouses that mirrors his own behavior. Like

the Host, however, he is perfectly happy to recommend them to his wife and ignore their

lessons himself.

The same is true of the Friar, who tells a tale of a summoner who is more concerned

with making money than taking his religious duties seriously. As we learn in the *General

Prologue*, however, the Friar is perfectly willing to accept gifts of money and food in lieu of

honest contrition from the people he shrives. Indeed,

> He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> For unto a povre ordre for to yive
> Is signe that a man is wel yshrive;
> For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
> He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
> For many a man so harde is of his herte,
> He may not wepe, althogh hym soore smerte.
> Therfore in stede of wepyng and preyeres
> Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres." (I (A) 223-32).

Like the summoner in his tale, the Friar is also committed to getting everything he can out

of the people he visits, even the poor. As the narrator says of him: "thogh a wydwe hadde

noght a sho, / So plesaunt was his 'In principio,' / Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he

wente. / His purchas was wel bettre than his rente." (I 252-6). This description of a man

who can get a farthing from a shoeless widow shows a distinct parallel with the fictional

summoner, who visits a "wydwe" who is "povre and oold" and demands that she give him

"twelf pens," or he will take away her "newe panne." (III 1619, 1608, 1603, 1614). Although

the fabular summoner fails where the Friar succeeds, both have no qualms about extorting

money from the poor. Like the Host and Jankyn, then, the Friar might be able to learn a

thing or two about his own behavior if he looked beyond labels. But this is a tale ostensibly

intended to inspire repentance in summoners, not friars. Thus, the Friar has no need to

examine his own behavior.[138]

Nor does the Pardoner, who has based an entire career around rejecting the morals

of the stories he tells other people. Whenever he travels to a location on his quest to sell

pardons, he preaches to the local people about the evils of greed and then tells a variety of

stories to illustrate this idea. As he relates: "Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon / Of

olde stories longe tyme agoon. / For lewed peple loven tales olde; / Swiche thynges kn they

wel reporte and holde." (VI (C) 435-8). By telling such tales, the Pardoner claims that he

may actually be helping people to become less greedy. As he states: "Thus kan I preche

agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice. But thogh myself be gilty in that

synne, / Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice and soore to repente." And

even though he does not care whether or not the people who hear his stories are improved

---

[138] As Mitchell notes, the Summoner likewise fails to apply the morals of his tale (including injunctions against anger and against the misapplication of exempla) to himself. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 102–3. See also Cooper's assessment: "The Friar's and Summoner's Tales parallel each other, not only in the way in which they vilify the rival profession, but in theme. The Friar, his summoner, the pilgrim Summoner and his Friar John all have many of the same vices, notably avarice, anger, and a weakness for alcohol, and in telling tales against each other the narrators are both also damning themselves." Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 131.

by them, stating: "that is nat my principal entente; / I preche nothyng but for coveitise," the fact that he indicates that the morals of his tales are for others means he is under no obligation to apply them to himself (VI (C) 427-33). He replicates the pseudo-altruistic logic of the Host and Friar for explicitly selfish purposes, but the effect is the same. Whether well or ill-intentioned, the act of finding a lesson in a story for someone else can give one a convenient excuse to stop looking for a lesson for oneself.

How, then, should readers approach the text if they wish to move beyond label-reading and redirecting relevance, and instead engage more deeply with the works they read? To some degree, we can piece together answers to this question by looking at what the characters do not do: what they miss and where they fall short. What would it be like if the Host had learned from Prudence? If he had thought more about the ways his wife was both similar and different from May? Thinking through where these characters fall short can help readers to consider how they may avoid these mistakes in their own particular reading contexts. In addition to giving readers negative reading strategies to think through, however, Chaucer also offers some potentially positive ones.

Some of these strategies are suggested by the Clerk in the epilogue and envoy to his tale, where he offers his readers three ways of interpreting it, and potentially of interpreting the other tales they encounter.[139] The first of these reading methods is borrowed from Petrarch and recommends a spiritual/allegorical reading; the second recommends a more pragmatic reading; and a third, in the envoy to the tale, gives

---

[139] There is some uncertainty over to whom to attribute the envoy, since many manuscripts label it as "Lenvoy de Chaucer." For a helpful summary of this debate, see: Thomas J. Farrell, "The 'Envoy de Chaucer' and the 'Clerk's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review* 24, no. 4 (1990): 329–36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25094139. For the purposes of my argument, I choose to adopt the attribution of the envoy to the Clerk. My analysis of this envoy, however, does not depend overmuch on the speaker being consistent across the Clerk's Epilogue and the Envoy.

potentially ironic advice to women readers. Each suggestion proposes a different way of thinking about literary interpretation. And all three of these pieces of advice, despite their tonal differences, in some way stand as alternatives to label-reading and the redirection of relevance.[140]

I will begin with a discussion of the first piece of advice, the Petrarchan one. While Chaucer makes some changes to the *Clerk's Tale*, he is open about having based it on Petrarch's adaptation of the tale of Griselda. And after his narrative has concluded, the Clerk begins his epilogue by providing his listeners with a version of Petrarch's gloss on the tale.[141] Within this gloss, one can detect the first of the Clerk's possible remedies for excessive label-reading: letting go of or swapping the labels on characters. For in ignoring labels, one may be able to find a lesson that applies to oneself, even if one is not a wife or a carpenter or a monk. The Clerk's Petrarchan gloss begins as follows:

> This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
> Folwen Grisilde in humylitee,
> For it were inportable, though they wolde,
> But for that every wight, in his degree,
> Sholde be constant in adversitee
> As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth
> This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.
> For sith a womman was so pacient
> Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
> Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
> For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte. (IV 1142-52)

---

[140] For a contrasting reading of the Clerk as a bad reader who simplistically interprets and overly personalizes his material, see: Kamowski, "Varieties of Response," 200–204. Both Kamowski and myself read Chaucer as encouraging readers to eschew reductive, prescriptive approaches to reading, but we differ in that I see the character of the Clerk as implicitly complicit with this goal on the fictional level of the storytelling game, whereas Kamowski reads the Clerk as more naïve, and thus an object lesson for Chaucer's real-world readers in how not to interpret.

[141] Warren S. Ginsberg, "Explanatory Notes to *The Clerk's Prologue* and *Tale*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 880, 883n1141-62.

In providing this interpretation, the Clerk immediately acknowledges the problems that would occur if "wyves" were to try to "Folwen Grisilde in humylitee." Were they to interpret the tale in terms of its labels, to derive a standard of wifely conduct from Griselda and apply this standard to all other wives, such an action would be "inportable." The word means "unbearable," in the sense of too heavy to be carried. [142] Thus, the Clerk suggests that if wives tried to bear the burden of Griselda's extreme humility, they would be unable to endure the weight. Holding up Griselda as a standard to other wives would figuratively crush them.

One option for readers to find a more workable message is thus to try swapping the labels. For the label of "wife," one may apply "every wight," and for the label of "husband," one may substitute "God." There are, of course, obvious problems with reading the sinister, unstable Walter as a figure for the Christian God.[143] This allegorical style of reading does,

---

[142] As Mitchell notes, this word can afford multiple interpretations depending on the sense in which it is taken. For example, it could suggest, in a misogynist fashion, that women are unable to bear acting like Griselda because they are too weak or degenerate relative to earlier women (a reading the Clerk suggests, perhaps ironically, as I will discuss below, when commenting that modern women are made of "bad" alloys compared to the pure gold of Griselda.) Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 123. It could also, however, suggest that it would be "intolerable" for everyone if women acted like Griselda, as to imitate her would suggest an immoral degree of spousal submissiveness amounting to idolatry or complicity with infanticide. Mitchell, 123, 124–26. In providing a word with multiple meanings, Chaucer can be understood as opening up the possibility of multiple interpretations of the tale and how it may signify, which he also does, as Mitchell argues, by having the Clerk suggest both "spiritual" and "literal" ways to read the tale (as exemplifying human patience towards God or a wife's patience towards her husband) Mitchell, 120–28. For more on the tale's indeterminacy and variable possibilities for interpretation, see: Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000623925; and J. Allan Mitchell, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2005.0001.

[143] As Elizabeth Salter notes in her classic study of the *Clerk's Tale*, the tale's competing registers, which promote the Petrarchan allegorical religious interpretation while simultaneously humanizing the characters, make it difficult to read Walter unproblematically as a figure for God.

however, remove the excuse that the text, on the basis of the labels borne by its characters, has lessons only for other people.[144] The ability to take a specific narrative and make it general gives readers interpretative options.[145]

This is not the only alternative to label reading the Clerk offers, however. There are other options, which the Clerk suggests after he has finished presenting Petrarch's method of interpretation. When discussing these options, I feel it is necessary to note that the Clerk's tone becomes increasingly comic, and more reliant on antifeminist stereotypes, as the epilogue and envoy progress, which has led many to read his suggestions as ironic.[146]

Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, 55–62. See also: Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 138.

[144] That being said, this does not mean that the morals one comes up with will be particularly useful or applicable. Following the *Physician's Tale*, for example, the Host moralizes that because the beautiful Virginia was targeted because of her beauty, and ultimately killed as a result of this targeting, the "yiftes of Fortune and of Nature / Been cause of deeth to many a creature . . . Of bothe yiftes that I speke of now / Men han ful ofte moore for harm than prow" (VI 295-300). A broader moral, and one that eschews overly specific labels, yet one that might be hard to find a practical application for. Even if one abandons limiting interpretative strategies, one must still be willing to face a certain amount of discomfort and self-scrutiny if one wishes to find an applicable moral.

[145] Indeed, as J. Allen Mitchell argues, the general applicability of this first moral of the Clerk's allows a range of reader responses, as the unclear referent of phrases such as "al . . . that God us sent" require readers to "supply something personal—say, the recognition of some accident or any other difficulty one has in securing one's general welfare—to fill in the detailsas to what here and now constitutes, in the Clerk's words, 'sharpe scourges of adversitee' (IV. 1157). How I see fit to express *vertuous suffraunce* in respect of those sharp scourges can only be something I discover in view of the particulars of my own experience." Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 120–21. For a reading of the Petrarchan moral as more problematic (and of the Clerk as aware of this), see: Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 150–52.

[146] This is the most common reading of the Clerk's envoy and the stanzas immediately preceding it. The envoy's comic tone and encouragement for women to dominate their husbands certainly constitutes a tonal clash with the tale's depiction of a hyperbolically patient wife, as well as with the Petrarchan moralization that the Clerk has just provided. This has led many to see it as an ironic addition to the tale, in which the Clerk uses humor to reinforce the tale's message of female submission, take a swipe at the Wife of Bath, or pursue other aims in opposition to the letter of the envoy. For an example of a study that focuses on the envoy's comic techniques, see: Laura Kendrick, "Comedy," in *A New Companion to Chaucer* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 115–17. See also: Charlotte C. Morse, "The Exemplary Griselda," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7, no. 1 (1985): 84,

Certainly, in the midst of delivering them, he tells the company: "lat us stynte of ernestful

matere." (IV 1175). As the Host proclaims earlier in the *Tales*, however: "A man may seye

ful sooth in game and pley" (I 4355). For the purposes of argument, I would like to

consider, for a time, what reading advice one might find in the Clerk's epilogue if his

suggestions are read earnestly.

If the Clerk's suggestions are earnest, then his second option for interpreting the

tale functions as an inversion of the first. Whereas the previous method involves

abandoning the labels but keeping the message, the second method involves keeping the

labels but reconsidering the obvious message. For even if one uses labels as a guide to

meaning and applicability, one can still choose to contemplate the text and consider the

message one takes from it, developing a lesson that is beneficial and that fits with one's life

and experiences instead of simply latching onto the one that is most immediately

obvious.[147]

The Clerk presents this option in his second caveat to readers, stating: "But o word,

https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0002; and Irving N. Rothman, "Humility and Obedience in the *Clerk's Tale*, with the Envoy Considered as an Ironic Affirmation," *Papers on Language and Literature* 9, no. 2 (1973): 115–27, ProQuest. Some have argued, however, for a reading of the envoy as more serious in its intent despite its comic tone—as a critique of Petrarch or a dissuasion against Griseldean behavior that is consistent with implicit or explicit critiques within the tale itself. Examples of such readings include: Jennifer E. Bryan, "'Following Echo': Speech and Common Profit in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42, no. 1 (2020): 73–109, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2020.0002; John A. Pitcher, *Chaucer's Feminine Subjects: Figures of Desire in the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 104–7; Leah Schwebel, "Redressing Griselda: Restoration through Translation in the *Clerk's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 47, no. 3 (2013): 295–96, https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.47.3.0274. For my part, while I acknowledge the envoy's ironic tone, I do not necessarily see this is incompatible with this passage containing some kind of serious "sentence."

[147] For a small selection of sources that acknowledge Chaucer's recognition of the importance (and perhaps inevitability) of readers personalizing their interpretations, see: Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A decorum of convenient distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 18–21; Mann, "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer"; Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 11–12.

lordynges, herkneth er I go: / It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes / In al a toun Grisildis

thre or two" (IV 1163-5). While his first piece of reading advice derives from the fact that

women would be unable to bear acting like Griselda, his second piece of advice is based on

the fact that very few real women *do* act like her. As the Clerk asserts, Griselda and her

patience have no parallels in the modern world: rather, it is full of women who, like gold

coins alloyed with brass, will break rather than bend (IV 1166-9). And while this may be

understood as a critique of the "badde alayes" (bad alloys) of characteristics that make up

modern women,[148] these imperfections make it necessary for readers to adopt a method of

interpreting texts that takes this truth into account: one that considers the reality of their

circumstances, and of themselves and the people surrounding them (IV 1166-9).

The Clerk therefore advises that "no wedded man so hardy be t'assaille / His wyves

pacience in trust to fynde / Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille." (IV 1177-82). And to

women, he recommends: "O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence, / Lat noon humylitee

youre tonge naille, / Ne let no clerk have cause or diligence / To write of yow a storie of

swich mervaille / As of Grisildis pacient and kynde, / Leste Chichevache yow swelwe in her

entraille!" (IV 1183-8). Here, the Clerk invites his readers to consider carefully what

would happen if they did try to emulate Griselda or Walter, given what they know of the

people in their own life.

For men, he suggests that trying to dominate a wife who is more assertive than

Griselda would lead to failure. For women, his recommendation is a bit more comical. If you

---

[148] J. Allen Mitchell, for his part, suggests that if the tale of Griselda is read literally, as an exemplum of ideal wifely behavior, then the Clerk's comments do betray a kind of "male chauvinist" take on the tale. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 123. If, however, the Clerk is understood to be presenting Griselda as an immoral exemplum to be avoided rather than followed, this changes the tenor of his comments. Mitchell, 123. I am inclined to adopt the latter reading, although, as I will discuss, the former is also plausible.

tried to be as submissive as Griselda, you might be eaten by Chichevache, a proverbial cow

that feeds on patient wives.[149] A silly moral, but beneath this humor, as with the imagery of

a coin bending and breaking under stress, is a direr warning: if you act like Griselda, you

may end up being consumed.

The Clerk is still addressing all wives and all husbands in his speech. But he has

injected into his discourse an element of the particularity of real life: a plea, "for the Wyves

love of Bathe," that people think about the real people they know before applying a moral

to them based on the people they encounter in books (IV 1170). Just because Griselda is a

wife and Walter a husband does not necessarily mean that other wives and husbands

should model their behavior off of them. The idea that "one should be like these characters"

may be the easiest or most straightforward reading, but before one applies it, one should

consider the particular husbands and wives one is trying to apply the lesson to. If

contemporary women are assertive, for example, then contemporary husbands should

acknowledge this and not put impossible standards of behavior onto them based on

outdated ideas of what it means to be a "wife."[150] Acknowledging the differences between

people who share a label, whether real or fictional, makes it harder to come up with a

---

[149] Ginsberg, "Explanatory Notes to *The Clerk's Prologue* and *Tale*," 883n1188.

[150] In "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," Laurel Amtower interprets Chaucer's narrator, Geffrey, as reading in a similar way in the *House of Fame*. While reading the *Aeneid*, Geffrey comments on the suffering caused by contemporary men who act like Aeneas when he abandons Dido. In doing so, Amtower argues, he works against the idea of Aeneas as a transcendent ideal, framing him instead as the central figure of a text whose "moral and imperative message . . . is no longer correct for Geffrey's world" Laurel Amtower, "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's House of Fame," *Philological Quarterly*, 2000, 286, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2152672952/E04087DC00B145F3PQ/1. As she states: "The dreamer refuses to read figuratively; that is, he refuses to use old, authoritative, or mythologized texts as the model or frame by which to read contemporary texts or actions" Amtower, 286. This refusal to uncritically apply the values of the literary past to the present bears a distinct resemblance to the Clerk's advice to his readers.

simple, catch-all moral that applies to everyone. At the very least, the reader who strives to follow the Clerk's second piece of advice will have to think about how the text applies to their life—an increase in thought that can potentially lead to a greater complexity of insight.[151]

The third and final piece of advice that the Clerk gives, in the envoy following his epilogue, is likewise based on an acknowledgement of the differences between individuals who may share a label. This piece of advice is a recommendation that people pick and choose the characters they learn from. For if individuals who share a label can be different, then an individual woman will have many literary models of women to choose from when deciding which lessons are most applicable to her life. If she finds in Griselda a poor model of femininity, or a poor fit for her experience, she may be able to learn better lessons from other literary women. Rather than Griselda, for example, the Clerk suggests that a woman should "Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence, / But evere answereth at the countretaille." (IV 1189-90). Even though Echo does not appear in the *Clerk's Tale*, if one has read a work in which she does appear, one may deliberately choose to follow her as a superior model to Griselda. By comparing the models offered by different characters in different texts who share a common label, one may better be able to identify the lessons that are valuable for one to learn and the models that are best for one to follow.

Thus far, I have read the Clerk's advice in a relatively straightforward manner, more or less disregarding the tone in which it is delivered. It could be argued, however, that his ironic tone, and his use of misogynist stereotypes in his suggestions, invalidate any attempt

---

[151] Laurel Amtower offers a similar reading of this passage and the Clerk's *Envoy*, arguing that "The Clerk contextualizes narratives within social frameworks," and that he "reveals the importance of immediate interpretation and contextualization in the dissemination of texts." Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 179–81.

to take them seriously. Certainly, when he is giving examples of how different women can apply the lessons of the text differently based on their experiences, his language strongly evokes anti-feminist stereotypes of overbearing wives who manipulate and dominate their husbands.

This can be seen when he advises "archewyves" to "stondeth at defense, / Syn ye be strong as is a greet camaille, / Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense." (IV 1195-7). His message that strong women should use their strength to defend against hostile men is good advice, but the comparison of women to camels gives one pause. So, too, does his advice that "Sklendre wyves," who are "feble in bataille," should be as "egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde" and "clappeth as a mille" until they get their way and claim dominance over their husbands (IV 1198-1200). Certainly, one may endeavor to talk down a hostile husband, but women's excessive talkativeness is a venerable antifeminist stereotype, and the terms he uses to give this advice are not flattering. Similar problems exist with his advice that wives who are "fair" should show themselves and their apparel off in front of others, whereas "foul" wives, who cannot rely on their looks, should "be fre of thy despence," work hard to make friends, and put on a carefree "chiere" (IV 1207-11). By advising women to put on a front in order to manipulate how others see them, he plays into tropes of women's vanity and deceptiveness. These examples do an excellent job of showing how female readers can customize the lesson of a text, in this case, "don't be like Griselda," to their own experiences. But the exaggeration and anti-feminism of the Clerk's language casts doubt on the seriousness of his message. [152]

---

[152] Indeed, the Clerk's envoy is often read as straightforward misogynist or antifeminist satire, the product of an implied rivalry between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath within the "Marriage Group," whose irony reinforces the idea of Griselda as an ideal and critiques the Wife of Bath's model of

It also opens up a number of questions. Has the Clerk has really decided to "stynte of ernestful matere?" (IV 1175). Is he suggesting that it is necessary for female readers to act in extreme and antisocial ways if they want to exercise autonomy? Does the Clerk actually want anyone to read in this way, or is he, through his hyperbolic examples, mocking women who diverge from the "authoritative" reading of a text? Is he speaking socially radical "sooth" in the guise of a "game," or is he simply playing?

Ultimately, I am not sure if these questions are answerable. Much like the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, which has never been definitively established as either a beacon of proto-feminism or a bastion of hackneyed misogynist commonplaces, *The Clerk's Tale* displays conflicting impulses.[153] It encourages men to treat women as human beings while calling attention to women's imperfections in stereotypically misogynist terms. It both

femininity. Perhaps the earliest articulation of this reading can be found in G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Modern Philology* 9, no. 4 (1912): 435–67, https://www.jstor.org/stable/432643, and it has subsequently been widely adopted (see, for example: Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, 62–64; Morse, "The Exemplary Griselda," 84.), although readings that acknowledge the ambiguity, rather than the unity, of the Clerk's multiple "endings" to his tale have become more common over time (see, for example: Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 150–54. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, for her part, sees the Clerk as distancing himself from *both* antifeminism and femininity in his envoy in an effort to protect his own masculinity. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 201–4. There are also readings that treat the envoy as less antifeminist or more pro-woman in its aims. John A. Pitcher, for example, reads the envoy's support of women as consistent with the Clerk's aims in his tale, stating: "the envoy is deliberately provocative, and yet embedded within the song are clear statements of solidarity with Alison's vision of feminine power . . . the Clerk here urges wives to reject the ideal of silent submission in favor of active, critical engagement with those who wield power; the 'commune profit' depends upon women making their influence felt in the public sphere." Pitcher, *Chaucer's Feminine Subjects*, 105.

[153] Judith Ferster acknowledges this ambiguity when she refers to this portion of the Clerk's envoy as a "half-ironic and half-serious endorsement of the Wife of Bath." Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 117. As she queries: "The problem of the envoy's tone—is it serious? is it ironic?—is part of the larger problem of the narrator. What are his values?" Ferster, 119. The question is a difficult one to answer, in part because, as she goes on to discuss, the Clerk makes "contradictory statements about his tale."Ferster, 119. Williams likewise suggests that Chaucer leaves it ambiguous whether the Clerk's envoy is to be taken as ironic or not. Williams, "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities," 393. See also: Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 150–55.

enthusiastically encourages women to read against the grain and suggests that doing so

could lead them to behave in a fashion that is anti-social and extreme. In this sense, it can

be understood as functioning in a rhetorically similar way to the Wife of Bath's own

Prologue, in which women are presented as loud, unruly, and dominating—but instead of

being condemned, they are celebrated for these traits.[154] Is her *Prologue* in earnest? Is the

Clerk's epilogue?[155] A more productive reading of these texts, I suggest, is to look on them

---

[154] As Jennifer Bryan argues, the *Clerk's Tale* can be read in precisely this way. In her analysis of the envoy, she notes that characters like the Wife of Bath and Proserpina in the *Merchant's Tale* regard the performance of antifeminist stereotypes as potentially empowering for women, because: "Women are *already* troped as chatterers, which means that they can, and might as well, talk back. Those who do are never going to be represented as dignified or eloquent, but if they are trying to prevail, they cannot care." Bryan, "Following Echo," 107. Because the Wife of Bath *does not care*, she "exemplifies the results-oriented, image-despising attitude that is central to what Middleton called the 'common style' in Ricardian poetry" (although Middleton's examples are significantly more "high-minded"). Bryan, 107; Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (January 1978): 96, 112, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2855608. Under the system of values Bryan associates with this style, "it is far better to be laughed at than to lose." Bryan, "Following Echo," 107. If the Clerk's envoy is read in the aristocratic Petrarchan style, with its valuation of "personal dignity," then the Clerk does indeed seem "satirical" and "misogynistic," but if his work as read in light of more "common" values, then the strong, fierce, exuberant, and successful harridans of his envoy start to seem much more appealing than the morbidly passive, politically ineffectual Griselda who cannot consistently serve the "common good." Bryan, 107. Rather than purely constituting a critique of women, then, the Clerk's misogynistic tropes may allow him to both represent resistance to power and to represent it as pleasurable. Bryan, 103–4.

[155] While the tonal similarities between the Wife's *Prologue* and the Clerk's *Envoy* tend to inspire scholars to read these works as opposed, one could equally well see these parallel passages as tending towards similar ends. As Helen Cooper suggests about these figures' respective tales: "The curious fact remains that in spite of all this, in spite of Alisoun and Griselda being diametrically opposite types of wifehood, the outlook finally presented by the Wife's and Clerk's tales is astonishingly close." In the figure of the loathly lady in the Wife of Bath's romance, who gains sovereignty but does not dominate her husband, and in the problems with Walter's drive for dominion in the *Clerk's Tale*, both tellers suggest the value of mutuality and the problems of dominance in a marriage. And the loathly lady's speech on the lack of correspondence between nobility of birth and nobility of character is an excellent match for the figure of Griselda. Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 139. See also: Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*, 149–50. One can also see parallels in the peripheral material surrounding their tales: in the Clerk's vexed relationship with his authoritative source (Petrarch), which parallels the Wife of Bath's hostility towards, but extensive appropriation of, antifeminist sources (Jerome, Matheolus, etc.), as well as in the fact that both encourage feminine rebellion in antifeminist terms but perhaps not for antifeminist purposes. On the Clerk's (and Chaucer's) critical stance towards Petrarch, see:

not as a promotion or dismissal of certain reading strategies and women's behaviors, but rather as a means to present these strategies and behaviors for the judgment (and potential use) of the reader.[156]

Indeed, I argue that the Clerk's epilogue can actually be read as an analysis of the Wife's *Prologue*, an analysis in which the Clerk identifies and calls attention to a number of the reading strategies that the Wife of Bath applies to textual interpretation. By mentioning the Wife of Bath in his epilogue, the Clerk marks his commentary as a discussion, not simply of his own tale, but of hers. And by mimicking the Wife of Bath's encouragements for women to behave as she does, he calls attention to the possibility that they might also *read* as she does. Maybe these practices will turn female readers into the monsters of misogynist fantasy. Maybe they will enable them to redress the wrongs to which a deeply ingrained societal power imbalance has subjected them. What matters is that these strategies exist in the text as methods of reading to think through. And by calling attention to them, as well as showing how they can be applied to different texts, the Clerk marks them as portable tools that are available to readers.

Indeed, when the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* is read in light of the Clerk's epilogue, it becomes apparent how the Clerk is deriving the reading strategies he mentions from the Wife's own approach to reading. For when she looks for lessons and exemplars in the texts

---

Schwebel, "Redressing Griselda," 287–88, 290–99. On the Wife of Bath's relationship to her sources, see: Warren S. Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," *The Chaucer Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 129–45, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096004; Hanning, "Roasting a Friar, Mis-Taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales"; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 113–31.

[156] Jill Mann puts it well when she says: "The whole of the *Canterbury Tales*, including the most apparently 'earnest' elements, comes under the heading of 'play', but it is in such play that new possibilities can be glimpsed and made available for lived experience." Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, x.

she reads, she measures them against her own experience, picking models that validate her beliefs and experiences and discarding or modifying those that don't.[157] This is not without its flaws as a reading method, but it does enable her to think more carefully about and do more things with the texts she reads.

She does this in part by choosing the specific Biblical figures she will regard as models when she is justifying her choice to remarry multiple times. Certainly Christ himself, the ultimate exemplum, "was a mayde," and the Samaritan woman at the well can be read as an example of a person who erred by marrying too often (III 139).[158] But there are other figures in the Bible, as the Wife of Bath states, who are regarded as holy despite practicing polygamy. "The wise kyng, daun Solomon," for instance, "had wyves mo than oon," but the Wife of Bath refers to these wives as a "yifte of God," the same way that she regards her own husbands, stating: "yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve!" (III 35-6; 39; 44). And although "shrewed Lameth" is regarded poorly for "his bigamye," she brings up the examples of Abraham and Jacob, who both "hadde wyves mo than two," as well as "many another holy man" who also had multiple wives (III 53-58). One could as easily take example from these "good" polygamists, and treat them as evidence for the tolerability of polygamy and remarriage, as one could treat the Samaritan woman as an example of what

---

[157] Interpreting the Wife of Bath as an aural/oral reader who treats the texts she hears as adaptable to present experience, Schibanoff argues that the Wife of Bath "has no concept of the "fixed" text of written tradition; unconsciously, she alters or destroys those authorities that conflict with her values or experiences." Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold out of Egypt," 89. See also Jost, "Interpreting Infinite Regression," 204–7.

[158] Although, as Warren S. Smith and others have noted, the Wife of Bath also calls into question the validity of this reading of the Samaritan woman. Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," 133–35.

not to do.[159]

Here we see her exemplifying two of the modes of reading that the Clerk calls attention to. She is swapping around labels, treating Biblical husbands as figures who exemplify lessons that are useful for wives. And she is also picking and choosing her models based on her own experiences and needs. Having experienced marriage, by and large, as a blessing, she sees in the blessed Solomon a reflection of her own relative happiness in marriage. And by choosing him as a model, she is able to extract a message from the text that justifies her choice to remarry. Rejecting the obvious morals of certain passages, she searches for ones that give a closer match to her own life, picking texts that she can "wel understonde" (III 29).[160]

The example of Christ is a bit trickier for the Wife to counter, since it would be difficult for her to get away with outright rejecting his example. But she is able work her way around it by applying another of the strategies the Clerk notices: acknowledging the differences between individuals and measuring the lessons one takes from a text against one's own life. Thus, while she does not contradict the idea that Christ is a good model or that one *should* only marry once, she maintains that people are different, and thus they differ in the lessons that should apply to them. While Christ tells others to sell all of their

---

[159] It should be noted that the Wife of Bath's examples and arguments for and against chaste widowhood here are derived largely from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, in particular 1.5, 1.14-15, and 1.40. Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 865n9-24, 865n33, 866 n54-6. She uses them, however, in her own way. For example, she prefers the examples of "holy" polygamists, which Jerome disapprovingly paraphrases from Jovinian in 1.5, to Jerome's examples of the chaste Christ and the erring Samaritan woman. For a more detailed look at the Wife of Bath's use of, and response to, Jerome, see: Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome." As Smith puts it: "Alison for her part shows her cleverness, and conciliatory approach, most vividly by deriving much of her position from out of the heart of the very misogynist treatise which she bitterly denounces later on." Smith, 143.

[160] See Jost, "Interpreting Infinite Regression," 204–7.

327

belongings and give them to the poor, the Wife maintains that he "Bad nat every wight" to

do so (III 107-10). Rather, "He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly; / And lordynges, by

youre leve, that am nat I." (III 111-2). Because she is not the same as everyone else, the

precepts that are allegedly for everyone do not necessarily apply to her.[161] The same is true

for advice for others to live chastely or never remarry. As the Wife of Bath says, "It liketh

hem to be clene, body and goost; / Of myn estaat I nyl nat make no boost, / For wel ye

knowe, a lorde in his houshold, he hath nat every vessel al of gold; / Somme been of tree,

and doon hir lord servyse. / God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse, / And everich hath of

God a propre yifte— / Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte." (III (D) 97-104).[162] While

some may prefer such a life, the Wife of Bath has "noon envie" of such people (III (D) 95).

 In this way, she is able to winnow the helpful lessons from those that are less useful

---

[161] See Smith: "She accepts the primacy of celibacy and the validity of many of Jerome's arguments about the nature of purity and holiness, though she restricts such purity to those who would "lyve parfitly" (111), from which company she excludes herself. In her utter honesty and refusal to claim more for herself than is due, Alison accepts the down-to-earth practicality of, for example, Cicero in *De Amicitia*, who proposes 'to look at things as they are in the experience of everyday life and not as they are in fancy or in hope'" Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," 133, quoting Cicero, "De Amicitia," in *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination.*, trans. W. A. Falconer, Loeb Classical Library 154 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), pt. 5, p. 127, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL154/1923/volume.xml.

[162] Here, as elsewhere, she borrows from arguments and examples given by St. Jerome in *Adversus Jovinianum*. Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 866n99-101. But by virtue of the context in which she uses them, she modifies their applicability. Thus Jerome's discussion of the vessels made of different materials, derived from 2 Tim. 2:20, which he uses to express the idea that both marriage and virginity are tolerable, becomes for the Wife of Bath a justification for both her multiple marriages and the way she reads. Jerome [Eusebius Hieronymus], "Adversus Jovinianum," 1:40; Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," 138–39. Because all vessels are not made of gold, one may choose to eschew the golden perfection of virginity in favor of the less perfect marriage, or even remarriage. And because all vessels are not made of gold, the Wife of Bath does not need to apply the precepts made for golden vessels to her more earthy self. The same is true for her statement, following Jerome, that Christ only bade those who were perfect to sell all of their goods and give them to the poor (III 107-12); Jerome [Eusebius Hieronymus], "Adversus Jovinianum," 2.6; Hilary, "Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*," 866n107-12. She knows who she is, and therefore can determine if the message applies to her or not. As she reads Jerome, she selects messages that are appropriate for her based on her experiences and sense of her own identity, and she also selects messages that validate her choice to read in this way.

to her. Measuring the text against her personal experience, she ends up with messages she can use. And by treating the Wife of Bath's reading strategies as portable, capable of being applied by other readers to other texts, the Clerk suggests that the Wife's readers may do the same. While the Wife of Bath is not perfect, and her reading style is often dismissive and self-serving, she nonetheless manages to avoid some of the pitfalls of label reading via her willingness to flexibly interpret what texts can signify and for whom.[163]

Thus, through the ambiguous figures of his pilgrim-readers and interpreters, Chaucer encourages his readers to adopt methods of interpretation that are more flexible, more complicated, and less based in fear of interpretative discomfort. Even these expanded methods, of course, do not guarantee that the reader will be willing to be changed by the text. A reader could choose, as the Wife of Bath does, to interpret texts in line with her own self-interest and pre-existing convictions about the world, "learning" new strategies for engagement with others but scarcely shifting her own received ideas. One could read flexibly for genre but inflexibly for meaning. One could swap the labels on characters and still end up with a moral that scarcely touches the text. But by calling attention to the problems with the pilgrims' interpretative methods—what reluctance to be challenged does to their ability to learn—Chaucer works to bring into his readers' consciousness the ways that deliberately limiting their readings can produce self-limiting results. And by offering them alternatives, he gives them some preliminary tools they may use, if they are

---

[163] On the Wife's self-interested interpretations of texts and reluctance to admit that she is actually self-interested in this way, see: Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 122, 128–38. Despite these shortcomings, the Wife of Bath, as Amtower argues, is nonetheless an active and engaged reader. She is not always right, but "even when she gets it wrong, she engages texts: she thinks, questions, and attempts to apply texts to her own experiences. As such, the Wife models an act of reading that advocates personal responsibility and suggests the possibility for redemption and change." Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 164.

willing, to confront the text in all of its distressing detail and to take away from the

experience something that just might help them learn.

Chapter 5

"And ys not this a wonder thyng?": Wonder and Learning in the *House of Fame*

In the previous chapter, I examined Chaucer's depiction, in the *Canterbury Tales*, of various ways in which prioritizing haste and avoiding interpretative discomfort can damage one's ability to learn personally valuable lessons from the works one reads. I also suggested some potential remedies to these flawed forms of reading, which Chaucer offers to his readers to encourage them to produce more engaged and complex textual interpretations. In this chapter, I look back to an earlier work of Chaucer's, the *House of Fame*, in which he similarly reflects on approaches to reading that can facilitate interpretation and learning. While I do not mean to suggest that this work is, in any way, a direct prequel to the *Canterbury Tales* (although many have seen its ending as pointing towards this later work),[1] I do see it as another work in which Chaucer explores certain key ideas about reading and interpretation that occupy him throughout his career. My central argument in this chapter is that what Chaucer offers, in the *House of Fame*, is a broadly accessible approach to reading that can be understood as a kind of antidote to hasty interpretation, or at least a method that exists in competition with it: the cultivation of *wonder* in response to the works one reads and hears.[2]

---

[1] This interpretation of the *House of Fame* seems to originate with George Lyman Kittredge, who suggests that in Chaucer's mention of "Pilgrims, pardoners, and shipmen" in the House of Rumor, "We can almost descry the Canterbury Tales in the distance." George Lyman Kittredge, "The House of Fame," in *Chaucer and His Poetry* (1915; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 102, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015009013700.

[2] In marking wonder as broadly accessible, I diverge from Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park's association of the wondrous with elite culture. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 19,

I define wonder, here, in the broadest sense, as a cognitive and emotional state

evoked by an encounter with that which one realizes one does not fully understand.[3] I will

develop this definition in greater detail in the following section of this chapter, with

reference to the specific ways Chaucer uses the term "wonder," and its variants, in the

House of Fame. These ways are numerous and complex, for the *House of Fame* is a work that

is deeply interested in the concept of wonder—its cognitive and emotional effects, its

causes, and the purposes to which it may be put.[4] As Piero Boitani argues: "there is no

doubt that the *House of Fame* is a collection of wonders, and that 'wonder' is one of the

---

https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015066446975. While the collection of wondrous objects and the profession of knowledge of their causes was certainly a sign of wealth or intellectual cachet, the experience of wonder itself, as Chaucer presents it, is in theory available to anyone who encounters the unknown and intriguing. And indeed, as Daston and Park note: "from the twelfth century on, marvels also featured prominently in vernacular romances. This signals a growing audience for wonders that included not only clerics and princes but also the knightly and eventually the bourgeois readers of that genre. By the middle of the fourteenth century, various earlier Latin books of marvels . . . had been translated into the vernacular, and other writers had begun to produce original vernacular topographical books of wonders, culminating in the spectacularly popular *Mandeville's Travels*." Daston and Park, 25. One can see, then, tied to the growth of vernacularity, a concomitant democratization of the wondrous, as books describing wondrous happenings and wondrous sights become more accessible. Even if the acquisition of such books is tied to aspirations towards social prestige, their existence in the vernacular inherently makes them accessible to a much wider variety of readers.

[3] In their studies of the concept of wonder in the Middle Ages, Caroline Bynum and Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park all note that wonder was generally understood as both emotional and cognitive—it had a physiological/affective component, but it was also about thought and knowledge. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1997): 23–24, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/102.1.1; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 14. As Daston and Park put it: "As theorized by medieval and early modern intellectuals, wonder was a cognitive passion, as much about knowing as about feeling." Daston and Park, 14.

[4] For analysis of Chaucer's meditation on human responses to the wondrous in other of his works, see Sharon Gayk's analysis of the miraculous in the Prioress's Tale, and Michelle Karnes' analysis of wonder in the Squire's Tale. Shannon Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng': Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 138–56, https://doi.org/10.1179/104125710X12670930868171; Michelle Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor in the *Squire's Tale*," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 461–90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24477794.

predominant feelings of its protagonist—a feeling that he underlines at key moments and wants to communicate to his readers."[5] Again and again, the work's narrator, Geffrey, expresses wonder at the things he sees, describes the objects of his attention as "wonders" and "wonders" about the experiences he has over the course of his dream. And by dramatizing Geffrey's encounters with wonder as he traverses the bookish dream-world of the *House of Fame*, Chaucer suggests the profound benefit of this experience for the reader who wishes to learn.

At the time of Chaucer's writing, the concept of wonder was diversely theorized and regarded. Medieval scholastic philosophers from the twelfth century onward tended to view wonder with a great deal of ambivalence, caught as they were between Aristotle's endorsement of wonder as the source of philosophy, Augustine's promotion of wonder but suspicion of curiosity, a growing contemporary skepticism regarding supernatural explanations of natural events, and the distressing nature of wonder as a response to the unknown, and thus as evidence of potential ignorance in the one who wonders.[6] Faced with the dangerous ambiguities of the wondrous, scholars attempted to find rational explanations for wondrous phenomena, and some have seen a form of this impulse in certain of Chaucer's writings. In his analysis of Chaucer's depictions of mechanized wonders in the *Squire's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale*, for example, Scott Lightsey notes a

---

[5] Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984), 175. Boitani goes on to list a number of the places where the poem includes the word "wonder" or one of its derivatives, as well as the myriad objects, characters, and locations it contains that are consistent with medieval conceptions of the marvelous. Boitani, 175–77. His list includes many of the mentions of wonder that I will be analyzing in this chapter.

[6] Scott Lightsey, "Chaucer's Secular Marvels and the Medieval Economy of Wonder," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 293–95, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2001.0027; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 109–30.

tendency of Chaucer's to rationalize wondrous objects, which he associates with

"contemporary theological skepticism about unknown phenomena."[7] Michael Van Dussen

likewise compares Chaucer to "the high- and late-medieval scholastic theologians who took

a skeptical view of miracles and wonders though, like them, never going so far as to deny

the possibility that legitimate disruptions or accelerations of the natural order could

occur."[8]

Although Chaucer draws from the prevailing scholastic opinion on the wondrous,

however, this was not the only discourse of wonder available to him, and far from the only

one he makes use of in his works. The writers of travel literature, for example, incorporated

vast catalogues of wonders into their writing to catch the attention of their readers, who

were invited to occupy a space between credulity and dismissal, and to enjoy the

experience of "cognitive uncertainty."[9] And Chaucer does so as well, exploring, in the

Squire's Tale, the ways in which wonder can lead to fruitful and imaginative contemplation

of ambiguous objects.[10] Romance writers wove wonders into their tales in the form of

marvelous objects and magical deeds, and expressed a fascination with cultivating and

exploring the nature of wonder.[11] And Chaucer does the same—presenting the reader of

---

[7] Lightsey, "Chaucer's Secular Marvels," 291–94.

[8] Michael Van Dussen, "Things," in *A New Companion to Chaucer* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 479.

[9] Michelle Karnes, "The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 209–10, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2020.0008. See also: Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 21–66.

[10] Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 461–74.

[11] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, "Simply Marvelous," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 6, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2004.0003.

the *Squire's Tale* with a profusion of wondrous objects and theorizing these objects' effects

on their observers.[12] Augustine connected wonder to the experience of the ineffable

majesty of God and Creation, and we see Chaucer, in the *Prioress's Tale*, exploring the

intense effects of religious wonder on those who experience and read about it, in a way that

reflects (and reflects on) the theological tendency to view wonder and curiosity as

inimical.[13]

Chaucer, then, intertwines multiple discourses and perspectives on wonder into his

works. And in the *House of Fame*, we can see Chaucer drawing upon this varied range of

discourses in order to craft his own perspective on wonder. For Chaucer's treatment of

wonder, while it partakes of many discourses, is not entirely encompassed by any of them.

Like Aristotle, he presents wonder as a product of ignorance and an impetus to inquiry, but

he differs from this philosopher in his tendency to see wonder in the unusual rather than in

the regular.[14] Like Augustine, he sees wonder as perspectival and values the experience of

wonder, but he does not share Augustine's suspicion of curiosity.[15] Like the scholastic

philosophers more generally, he understands wonder as stemming in part from a lack of

knowledge or understanding, and of wonder as capable of being rationalized by

knowledge.[16] But although he sees the value of wonder rationalized, he is also willing to

entertain the value of preserving it. He is likewise similar to the diverse writers of

[12] Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 461–74.

[13] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 40–44, 122–23; Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 149–53; Bynum, "Wonder," 7, 11.

[14] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 111, 116–17.

[15] Bynum, "Wonder," 8; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 40–44, 122–23.

[16] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 109–33.

entertainment literature, in that he sees wonder as stemming from personal encounters with the strange and the singular, and he views generalization and explanation as inimical to wonder.[17] But while such authors vary greatly in their sense of the value and uses of wonder, Chaucer is consistent in this work in treating wonder as an aid for learning.

In essence, he occupies a space between the poets and the philosophers in his perspective on wonder. As Michelle Karnes puts it: "Poets seek to preserve or inculcate wonder while philosophers are motivated by it and seek to replace it with knowledge. Because literature and philosophy intersect at wonder, the inquiries of either field can benefit the other."[18] As a poet interested in philosophy, Chaucer perceives both the value of wonder as an impetus to inquiry and the value of wonder's preservation as an aid to speculation and to creative thought. And in thinking on, and illustrating, wonder and the wondrous in the *House of Fame*, he demonstrates how the experience of wonder may allow willing readers to reap these benefits for themselves.

What is Wonder?

In order to understand how wonder is a salutary state for the reader interested in learning, it is necessary first to understand what exactly Chaucer means by "wonder" when he uses the word in the *House of Fame*. In order to answer this question, I will be analyzing his usage of the word "wonder" and its derivatives (such as "wondred," "wonderful", and

---

[17] Bynum, "Wonder," 13–14, 24.

[18] Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 463.

"wonderliche") throughout the poem.[19] I will be clarifying and contextualizing my analysis with reference to Caroline Walker Bynum's essay "Wonder," in which she presents an overview of key discourses and theories of wonder (*admiratio*) prevalent in Europe from the twelfth through the fourteenth century, as well as Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park's capacious study of the discourse of wonder from the twelfth to eighteenth century.[20] Having established these characteristics of wonder, I will then go on to explain why these characteristics make it particularly beneficial for the learner.

"Wonder," as Chaucer characterizes it in the *House of Fame*, is, in its broadest sense, a state produced by an encounter with something one does not fully understand. This state

---

[19] In striving to define what Chaucer means to communicate about the concept of wonder, I will generally be disregarding uses of the word "wonder" where it seems to be functioning purely as an intensifier (to convey the sense of "very"). An example would be when Geffrey narrates that he fell asleep "wonder sone," or that there were "wonder fewe" people in one of the groups petitioning Fame (114, 1690). The use of these intensifiers does draw attention to the text's interest in the concept of wonder. However, they do not seem to indicate much about what it is like to experience wonder or what objects may properly be deemed wondrous. Chaucer's use of the adjective "wonderliche," on the other hand, far more often seems to indicate some particularly wondrous quality about an object. I also focus much less on words such as "marvel" and "mervelous," because although these terms are often interchangeable with "wonder" and "wondrous" in medieval literature, Chaucer shows a distinct preference for the word "wonder" in this text, and only uses the former terms in scenarios where it is less clear that he is experiencing the sensation of wonder. Bearing in mind Bynum's caveat that "Finding wonder-words is easy; finding wonder is far more complicated," I nonetheless will strive to examine the link between Chaucer's "wonder-words" and what he is communicating about the experience of wonder in this work. Bynum, "Wonder," 15.

[20] While Bynum at times makes general statements about how the concept of wonder was viewed at the time, she organizes her essay around three discourses of wonder found in three kinds of literature: "a theological-philosophical understanding of wonder emanating from university intellectuals; a religious discourse about wonder found in sermons, devotional writing, and above all in the enormously popular genre of saints' lives; and a literature of entertainment, within which I include travel accounts, history writing, and the collections of odd stories called by one author 'trifles for the court.'" Bynum, 6–7. If Bynum indicates a discourse of wonder as proper to a particular kind of literature, I will indicate this. I will not be focusing exclusively on a particular discourse of wonder, however, because even though the *House of Fame* can be considered a work of entertainment literature, Chaucer draws from all of these discourses when illustrating the operation of wonder.

may have varied cognitive and emotional effects on the viewer,[21] but chief among them are

focused attention, intense thought, and a desire to learn more about the object of wonder.[22]

Since one only experiences wonder when confronted with things that are personally

strange or baffling, the objects that evoke wonder can vary dramatically between

individuals. In general, however, the objects that appear the most wondrous are those that

are both resistant to categorization and ripe with potential significance.

From this preliminary definition, one can begin to sketch some of the benefits of

wonder for the learner. Because wonder is both "personal and perspectival," the

---

[21] Wonder had a wide range of emotional states associated with it throughout the Middle Ages, and the portrait of wonder we see in the *House of Fame* is correspondingly broad. As Daston and Park observe: "from at least the twelfth century the vernacular terms for wonder, like the Latin, admitted a spectrum of emotional tones or valences, including fear, reverence, pleasure, approbation, and bewilderment." Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 16. Bynum likewise observes that "Examination of the complex semantic fields for 'wonder' and 'the wonderful' suggests that the wonder-reaction ranges from terror and disgust to solemn astonishment and playful delight." Bynum, "Wonder," 15. When striving to characterize the wonder-response as Chaucer depicts it in the *House of Fame*, I see it as encompassing a wide range of emotions including curiosity, awe, interest, astonishment, desire, and bafflement. I do, however, see it as distinct from, but linked to, the emotion of fear (a distinction and linkage which I will discuss later).

[22] In this chapter and the next, I generally refer to those sensory and imaginative stimuli that cause an individual to experience the state of wonder as "wondrous objects" or "objects of wonder" as opposed to the more common "marvels" or "*mirabilia*." I use this terminology in part because the term "marvel," in particular, is often associated with concrete objects in modern discourse. As Michelle Karnes defines the term: "Marvels, or *mirabilia*, were wonder-inducing events and objects that seemed to defy nature's laws, such as stones and plants with unusual physical and medicinal properties, self-moving machines or automata, astronomical anomalies, and various works of magic." Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 462.. While most of the objects that Chaucer presents as wondrous in the House of Fame do fall into these categories, I also wish to include the categories of wondrous concepts or intellectual "puzzles," which, as Michael Van Dussen notes, can also lead to wonder. Van Dussen, "Things," 477–78. Chaucer also displays a marked preference for the word "wonder" over "marvel" in the *House of Fame*. Finally, "objects of wonder" encompasses both the marvelous and the potentially miraculous, which might otherwise be implicitly distinguished. For a discussion of this terminological distinction, and an argument for distinguishing between marvels, miracles, and the responses evoked by them, see: Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 141, 151–53. My impression is that in this work, at least, Chaucer's narrator, Geffrey, seems to react to, and think about, the marvelous and the potentially miraculous very similarly. Hence it may be less necessary to clearly distinguish between these terms in this context.

experience of wonder indicates the presence of something that is personally unknown to the one who is experiencing it.[23] Because this experience is strongest when one perceives the potential significance of an object, wonder orients the viewer towards that which has the potential to teach one something. Because wonder fixes the attention on the wondrous object and stimulates intense thought, it places the wonderer in a position to gather observations about the wondrous object, and potentially to construct new ideas from these observations. And because wonder is often directed at that which seems to challenge one's paradigms or resist categorization, it opens up the possibility for a kind of learning that does not just supplement one's existing knowledge, but also suggests new ways of thinking about the world and the things within it.

The idea that wonder is "personal and perspectival" is a common one in medieval literature, and it can be seen throughout the *House of Fame*.[24] Bynum traces this understanding of wonder to the theories of Aristotle and Augustine, the latter of whom, in *De civitate Dei*, frames wonder as "a situated response to what is unusual or 'other' to a particular viewer."[25] As what is "unusual" or "other" to one person may be familiar to another, the experience of wonder is heavily dependent on the personal experiences and perspective of the viewer.[26] And while Augustine, and later commentators, did suggest that

---

[23] Bynum, "Wonder," 8. Like Christine de Pizan's identification, then, wonder can function as a signal of the presence of something that may be meaningful to oneself, in particular.

[24] Bynum, 8.

[25] Bynum, 8.

[26] Daston and Park identify this view of wonder as characteristic of the high medieval view of wonder more generally, which linked the experience of wonder to the "experience of the novel or unexpected, and ignorance of cause." Because wonder stemmed from these causes, "wonder was always relative to the beholder; what was novel to one person might be familiar to another, and

miracles could be considered objectively wondrous, regardless of one's perspective, the more everyday experience of wonder was largely understood to be a matter of the knowledge of the viewer.[27]

In keeping with this contemporary understanding of wonder, Chaucer takes care to show that one's perception of an object as wondrous is largely dependent on one's own prior knowledge and experience. An example of this occurs right at the beginning of the poem, when Geffrey states that the cause of dreams is a wonder to him. As he says: "hyt is wonder, be the roode, / To my wyt, what causeth swevenes" (2-3).[28] He immediately marks the cause of dreams as wondrous, but he presents this wonder as a product of his own perspective and limitations. These things are wondrous to *his* "wyt," but this phrasing implies that they might be less wondrous to the wits of others, who understand them better than he does. Indeed, after his declaration of his lack of knowledge on the causes of dreams, he states: "but whoso of these miracles / The causes knoweth bet than I, / Devyne he, for I certeinly / Ne kan hem nought" (12-15). Although he designates dreams as miracles, and thus, by implication, objectively wondrous, he simultaneously suggests that

---

what was mysterious to one might be causally transparent to someone better informed." Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 23. While this view of wonder is an earlier one, it is still very visible in Chaucer's own discourse of wonder.

[27] Bynum, "Wonder," 8–9. Augustine also had a very positive view of wonder, as he regarded it as the proper response to God's creation. He was deeply suspicious, however, of "curiosity," preferring wonder that led to reverence for God rather than curiosity that sought to know the causes of earthly things. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 40, 122–24. Chaucer, for his part, seems to regard both wonder and curiosity positively in this work.

[28] All citations from the *House of Fame* in this chapter will be given in text in parentheses. All citations are taken from: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 347–73.

his perception of these things as miraculous is based on a personal lack of knowledge.[29]

He uses a similar construction when describing the characteristics of the goddess Fame. When introducing her, he makes it explicit that he considers her wondrous by noting the "wonderliche" way she is able to stretch herself from earth to heaven (1373-5). After this, he goes on to say: "And therto eke, as to my wit, / I saugh a gretter wonder yit, / Upon her eyen to beholde" (1373-5; 1377-9). Fame's power to change her size is wondrous, but to Geffrey's "wit," the sheer number of eyes that cover her body is more wondrous still. Once again, wonder is a matter of his personal perspective.

The Eagle, Geffrey's guide through the second book of the poem, also tends to treat wonder as something that is dependent on an individual's perspective. An example of this can be seen when the Eagle is explaining to Geffrey how ripples behave in a body of water. After giving an overview of how ripples form, he states that even if they are not visible on the surface, ripples continue to expand invisibly underneath the water. As he says: "Althogh thou mowe hyt not ysee / Above, hyt gooth yet alway under, / Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder (804-6). The Eagle frames his discussion of underwater ripples with two syntactically parallel sentences: "Althogh thou mowe hyt not ysee," and "Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder." By using this parallel construction to describe Geffrey's inability to see the ripples and his wonder at their behavior, the Eagle links the two, highlighting the nature of Geffrey's wonder as a matter of personal perspective. Geffrey's vision has prevented him from peering beneath the surface of the water, and thus he may feel wonder at the idea of invisible ripples, just as he may wonder at the behavior of sound-waves

---

[29] Here, Chaucer leans a bit towards the more scholastic view of wonder as a sign of ignorance, although he does not treat it with the negative valance that many scholastic philosophers did. For more on the idea of wonder as a symptom of ignorance in the works of high and late medieval scholastic philosophers, see: Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 109–33.

traveling up to Fame's House. The Eagle, on the other hand, fully understands the physics

behind these phenomena, and thus does not wonder at them.[30]

Finally, when establishing the wonderful qualities of certain objects, Chaucer often

frames them as wonderful because nobody (or at least not Geffrey) has ever seen their like

before. When describing the wondrousness of his dream, for example, Geffrey states:

"never sith that I was born, / Ne no man elles me beforn, / Mette, I trowe stedfastly, / So

wonderful a drem as I" (62). Similarly, when describing the Eagle, Geffrey states: "hit

semed moche more / Then I had any egle seyn," and: "Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte

/ That never sawe men such a syghte, / But yf the heven had ywonne / Al newe of gold

another sonne" (503-6). Finally, when he sees the House of Fame, he relates:

> That al the men that ben on lyve
> Ne han the kunnynge to descrive
> The beaute of that ylke place,
> Ne coulde casten no compace
> Swich another for to make,
> That myght of beaute ben his make,
> Ne so wonderlych ywrought (1167-73)

What is wondrous is that which exceeds the experience of the viewer: a bird unlike any that

Geffrey has seen, a dream like no other, or a house that could not have been built by human

hands. These things are wondrous to Geffrey because they are unknown. And in presenting

them as things that nobody has ever encountered before, Chaucer is marking them as

---

[30] Or at least the Eagle acts as though he fully understands the physics. His combination of accepted science with poetic fantasy, coupled with certain rhetorical problems in his lesson, has led a number of scholars to view him as a less-than-authoritative source. See, for example: Deanne Williams, "The Dream Visions," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 160; Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 74–75; Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen, 1968), 98, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106001884201; Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 109–10, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001302318.

objects that the reader ought to find wondrous as well: objects that, if not miraculous, certainly are outside of the experience of almost everyone who might see them.

In the *House of Fame*, then, one experiences wonder when one encounters the unknown. And the effects of the state of wonder on the viewer can be understood as a product of this confrontation with the limits of one's knowledge: a set of affective signals that both indicate to the observer the presence of an unknown object and that facilitate observation of, and speculation about, this object—in essence, that prime the observer to learn more about it.[31] When discussing the affective effects of wonder, I should note that there is not one singular experience of "wonder" described in this work. Geffrey describes many objects as wondrous, and his reactions to these objects vary in content and intensity. There are certain common threads to his responses, however—threads that, if followed, suggest a web of related experiences that characterize the state of wonder more broadly. It is those that I will be investigating below.

Wonder, at the time of Chaucer's writing, was understood as a complex experience that engaged both the intellect and the emotions. As Bynum relates: "Examination of the complex semantic fields for "wonder" and "the wonderful" suggests that the wonder-

---

[31] While Bynum is careful to distinguish between wonder (which produces the desire for investigation) and investigation itself (which many texts present as opposed to wonder), it is apparent that wonder, in both the *House of Fame*, and in the texts that Bynum studies, "entailed a passionate desire for the *scientia* it lacked; it was a stimulus and incentive to investigation." Bynum, "Wonder," 24. One can thus see parallels between the conception of wonder in Chaucer's work and the later Cartesian idea of wonder as "a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary." René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. S. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), pt. 2, art. 70, pp. 56–57, quoted in Bynum, "Wonder," 5. Bynum is careful to note that neither the Cartesian nor the medieval conceptions of wonder are purely physiological: both contain a cognitive element. Bynum, 5.

reaction ranges from terror and disgust to solemn astonishment and playful delight."[32] In addition to its affective elements, the experience of wonder also, as Bynum argues, "had a strong cognitive component; you could wonder only where you knew that you failed to understand. Thus wonder entailed a passionate desire for the *scientia* it lacked; it was a stimulus and incentive to investigation."[33] Daston and Park likewise note that "As theorized by medieval and early modern intellectuals, wonder was a cognitive passion, as much about knowing as about feeling."[34] It is this kind of cognitive, desire-driven state of wonder that Chaucer focuses on most heavily in the *House of Fame*. And the effects of this state on the one experiencing it can be observed through Geffrey's varying responses to the objects he describes as wondrous.

The primary effect of wonder on the wonderer appears to be fixed attention on, and intense observation of, the object of wonder. This fixed attention may be accompanied by a sense of astonishment, intense thought about the object of wonder, and an equally intense desire to know more about the wondrous object. As a result of these effects, the experience of wonder may lead to the action of *wondering*, as the one experiencing wonder begins to ponder the object of wonder. The desire to know may also lead one to actively investigate,

---

[32] Bynum, "Wonder," 15.

[33] Bynum, 24. Aristotle is one of the important philosophical sources of this view. As Daston and Park explain, "For Aristotle, wonder, which arose from ignorance about the causes of natural phenomena, led people to search for those causes and was therefore essential to the process of philosophical inquiry." Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 111. Augustine, for his part, was staunchly opposed to the idea of curiosity as a response to wonder, seeing in this form of inquiry a perverse focus on the worldly, when wonder ought instead to make one appreciate the majesty of God. Daston and Park, 44. 122-123.

[34] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 14.

and attempt to learn more about, that which first seemed incomprehensible.[35]

The idea that wonder produces fixed attention can first be seen when Geffrey notices the Eagle soaring high above him. Observing its unusual size, golden color, and the intense brightness of its feathers, which seems to rival the sun, he relates:

> The egle, of which I have yow told,
> That shon with fethres as of gold,
> Which that so hye gan to sore,
> I gan beholde more and more
> To se the beaute and the wonder (529-33)

Having spotted the Eagle, Geffrey begins to gaze on it more and more intently, in order to see the "beaute" and "wonder" of the sight. Wonder, in this sense, seizes the attention—all of Geffrey's effort is focused on simply observing the majestic bird.[36]

Similarly, upon first seeing Fame herself, Geffrey is fixated on the act of observation. He notes her shifting height, her strange and wondrous body, and the intense beauty of her adornments (1365-94). Absorbed in the experience of looking at her and listening to the music of the Muses that surrounds her, it is a while before he can see anything else. As he writes:

> Tho was I war, loo, atte laste,
> As I myne eyen gan up caste,

---

[35] In her analysis of Chaucer's depiction of wonder in the Squire's Tale, Michelle Karnes observes wonder as following a similar trajectory, beginning with a kind of paralysis in which the viewer intently observes the details of the wondrous object. Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 469. When this inquiry fails to yield answers, one then begins to speculate about the wondrous object. Karnes, 469–70. These parallels suggest a certain consistency in Chaucer's thinking about wonder across these works. Although Lightsey suggests that Chaucer takes a skeptical approach to wonder, he likewise notes the way the viewers in the *Squire's Tale* react to wondrous objects with analysis and inquiry. Lightsey, "Chaucer's Secular Marvels," 311–14.

[36] See Aquinas's comment, quoted in Bynum's work: "wonder is the best way to grab the attention of the soul." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), IIIa, q. 30, art. 4, reply to obj.1, page 2182, quoted in Bynum, "Wonder," 10.

> That thys ylke noble quene
> On her shuldres gan sustene
> Bothe th'armes and the name
> Of thoo that hadde large fame" (1407-12)

He is able, "atte laste," to notice the reputations that she bears upon her shoulders. But

compared to the wonder of the goddess, and the pure aesthetic pleasure of her

surroundings, his description of these famous men is brief and almost comical. When

describing Fortune and the Muses, Geffrey cries:

> But Lord, the perry and richesse
> I saugh sittyng on this godesse!
> And Lord, the hevenyssh melodye
> Of songes ful of armonye
> I herde aboute her trone ysonge (1393-97)

In contrast, the reputations on her shoulders are simply those of "thoo that hadde large

fame: / Alexander and Hercules, / That with a sherte hys lyf les." (1412-14). The powerful

Hercules is reduced to the humiliating fact of his death from a poisoned shirt, and

Alexander's exploits are not described at all. Rather, Geffrey's attention is absorbed by the

wondrous and the "hevenyssh," next to which the exploits of the most famous of men

cannot catch his interest.

Geffrey displays a similar response when confronted with the "wonderlych yrought"

House of Fame, which appears to be carved out of a single, massive gemstone, and which is

covered in niches in which famous minstrels, storytellers, and other entertainers

constantly perform. At first, Geffrey is too low to see the castle clearly, but once he climbs

level with it, he becomes absorbed in observing every detail of the scene that he can. Again

and again in the following lines, he repeats the refrains: "There saugh I" and "There herd I"

as he discusses the construction of the castle and identifies the people who dot its walls

(1251, 1245). So fixed are his senses on the scene that he does not even move until he

considers himself to have observed everything. Indeed, after acknowledging that

describing all of the people he saw would take him until doomsday, Geffrey states:

> Whan I had al this folk beholde,
> And fond me lous and nought yholde,
> And eft immused longe while
> Upon these walles of berile,
> That shoon ful lyghter than a glas
> And made wel more than hit was
> To semen every thing, ywis,
> As kynde thyng of Fames is,
> I gan forth romen til I fond
> The castle-yate on my ryght hond (1285-94)

Only when he has observed the near-infinite number of people and fully considered the

properties of the walls does he begin to "forth romen" from his fixed position (1293).

What fixes Geffrey in place is both the sense of astonishment and the intense

thought inspired by his state of wonder.[37] Indeed, after introducing the wondrous quality of

---

[37] One can draw a productive comparison between this state of wonder and the state of "enchantment" as described by Rita Felski and Jane Bennett, which Tara WIlliams connects to medieval depictions of wonder. Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 25–26, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58832. Felski describes enchantment as "characterized by a state of intense involvement, a state of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter." Rita Felski, "Enchantment," in *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 51–76. The enchanted reader or observer becomes "enclosed in a bubble of absorbed attention" and experiences "an unusual intensity of perception and affect" that may lead to the sense that the reader has lost control in the face of the text. Felski, 55. Indeed, as Felski states: "Descriptions of enchantment often pinpoint an arresting of motion, a sense of being transfixed, spellbound, unable to move, even as your mind is transported elsewhere." Felski, 55. It is this state of frozen, heightened attention and perception that makes wonder such a privileged state for the observation of the wondrous object. Bennett likewise associates the state of enchantment with both the cessation of motion and intensity of perception, stating:

> *enchantment* entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter: it is to be transfixed, spellbound . . . Thoughts, but also limbs . . . are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear. You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a collection of singularities. Enchantment includes, then, a condition of

the House of Fame, he states: "That hit astonyeth yit my thought, / And maketh al my wyt

to swynke, / On this castel to bethynke" (1174-6). Even remembering how wondrous the

castle is replicates the experience of astonishment he had when he first saw it. And actively

thinking about it after the fact causes his wits to "swynke," or labor, in the effort of

comprehending it. This intense thought parallels that of his original encounter with the

House of Fame, in which he "imused longe while / Upon these walles of berile" (287-8).

Seeing a wondrous object produces intense thought, and because the object remains

wondrous in retrospect, it remains thought-provoking.

This state of astonished wonderment, and the intense thought accompanying it, may

stun the viewer or leave them at a loss for words. Unlike the astonishment of fear, however,

the astonishment of wonder leaves the wonderer able to observe and remember the

wondrous object. And when the initial astonishment fades, then the "wit" is given full play

to wonder, and to pursue the desire to know.

The stunning effect of wonder, as well as its compatibility with observation and

memory, is clear in Geffrey's account of how the castle "astonyeth" his thought and causes

his mind to labor. The House of Fame is so far beyond his comprehension that, as he

confesses:

> . . . the grete craft, beaute,
> The cast, the curiosite
> Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
> My wit ne may me not suffise.
> But natheles al the substance
> I have yit in my remembrance;
> For whi me thoughte, be Seynt Gyle,
> Al was ston of beryle (1177-84)

---

exhilaration or acute sensory activity. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

There is a bit of a pun here, as Geffrey recognizes the "substance" that the castle is made of:

carved beryl. But he also remembers the "substance" of the experience itself—describing, if

not every detail of the castle's construction, then the most important elements: the way the

walls magnify everything, the niches in which the performers stand, and the identities of

the people themselves (1288-92, 1193-1200, 1201-81). Although he cannot describe it

fully, then, his wonder has allowed him to incorporate the substance of the castle into his

memory, as material for future thought.[38]

This is in contrast to the astonishment of pure terror, which can not only interrupt

the experience of wonder but shut down one's ability to perceive.[39] This can be seen when

Geffrey's wonder at the Eagle's flight is interrupted by the Eagle swooping down, seizing

him in its talons, and flying away with him. Geffrey is so shocked and frightened by this

occurrence that he relates:

> . . . I cam up, I nyste how.
> For so astoned and asweved
> Was every vertu in my heved,
> What with his sours and with my drede,
> That al my felynge gan to dede,
> For-whi hit was to greet affray. (548-53)

As when he sees the House of Fame, he is "astoned." In contrast to the astonishment of

wonder, however the astonishment of fear leads to complete mental, as well as physical

---

[38] On the mnemonic efficacy of forming emotional associations and the necessarily emotional nature of memory as it was conceptualized in the Middle Ages and in Antiquity, see: Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 59–60, 169, 174.

[39] As Jane Bennett argues, citing Albertus Magnus, "Fear, accompanying such an extraordinary state, also plays a role in enchantment . . . But fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to be, for the latter requires active engagement with objects of sensuous experience; it is a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe. Unlike enchantment, overwhelming fear will not becalm and intensify perception but only shut it down." Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 5.

paralysis. Only when the Eagle begins to speak to Geffrey and comfort him with its words does he begin to recover from the physiological effects of his swoon (554-582). And once his fear has lessened in intensity, it is then that Geffrey's senses return and he "Gan for to wondren in my mynde" about why the Eagle has taken him (583). Wonder, then, is not fear. Rather, the astonishment of wonder, while it challenges the mind, also stimulates it. Geffrey experiences wonder upon seeing the Eagle, the Eagle frightens him into semi-consciousness, and only when his fear has lessened is he able to engage in the act of wondering. Conversely, Geffrey experiences wonder and astonishment upon seeing the House of Fame, and although he finds himself unable to describe it fully in retrospect, he is able to remember the details, as his state of wonder leads him to begin closely observing and thinking about the walls of the castle and the people in it.

As an affectively engaging state oriented towards the gathering and retaining of sensory information, then, wonder can be understood as a privileged aid to learning, by virtue of the way it functions as an aid to memory. In her discussion of medieval mnemonic practices and theories of memory, Mary Carruthers notes how medieval schemes of memory-formation and recollection:

> . . . all acknowledge the importance of tagging material emotionally as well as schematically, making each memory as much as possible into a personal occasion by imprinting emotional associations like desire and fear, pleasure or discomfort, or the particular appearance of the source from which one is memorizing, whether oral (a teacher) or written (a manuscript page). Successful recollection requires that one recognize that every kind of mental representation, including those in memory, is in its composition sensory and emotional."[40]

Because the process of recall was understood to involve a kind of "re-enactment of experience, which involves cogitation and judgment, imagination, and emotion," the more

---

[40] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 60.

one is able to form memory-images or scenes that are "'rich' in associations," including detailed information about one's environment, how the things in it interact, and how one feels about this process, the more successful one is likely to be at recalling these memories.[41] Because wonder is emotionally compelling, it is easy for the one experiencing it to recollect and re-experience this state, as Geffrey does when thinking back on the House of Fame. And because the state of wonder heightens one's focus on the sensory details of the wondrous object, it can create "rich" associations with this object that one may draw upon when recollecting it.[42] The single-minded focus of wonder might, of course, run the risk of narrowing this mental "scene," but the sheer memorability of wondrous objects appears to allow Geffrey, by association, to recall the things around them as well. And because "learning" is impossible without memory, one can understand an experience that is beneficial to memory as beneficial to learning as well.[43]

Wonder, then, helps one to identify an object that is personally unknown and to observe and gather information about it. It also has the potential to orient one towards assembling this information, by virtue of the way it evokes the desire to understand. When Geffrey is captivated by the sight of the "wonderlych" made House of Rumor, for example, he first engages in intense observation of the exterior, noticing every detail that he can

---

[41] Carruthers, 60.

[42] The goal of medieval "arts" of memory was, of course, to train one's memory by practicing techniques of "artificial" memory construction and recollection. Carruthers, 70. But just as one can observe that certain memories are more salient than others, one can see how wonder, by virtue of the "rich" experiences it produces, might be useful even to an "untrained" memory.

[43] Carruthers cites Hugh of St. Victor on this topic, stating: "Without retention in the memory, says Hugh, there is no learning, no wisdom. 'the whole usefulness of education consists only in the memory of it.'" Carruthers, 82, quoting Hugh of St. Victor, "De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum," ed. William M. Green, *Speculum* 18 (1943): 490.

(1922). He then attempts to categorize the house by comparing it to his past experiences,

saying: "Certys . . . in al myn age, / Ne saugh y such an hous as this.'" (1986-7). This

observation and processing can be understood as a kind of wondering, and indeed, Geffrey

relates:

> . . . as y wondred me, ywys,
> Upon this hous, tho war was y
> How that myn egle faste by
> Was perched hye upon a stoon;
> And I gan streighte to hym gon,
> And seyde thus: "Y preye the
> That thou a while abide me,
> For Goddis love, and lete me seen
> What wondres in this place been;
> For yit, paraunter, y may lere
> Som good theron, or sumwhat here
> That leef me were, or that y wente." (1988-99)

First, he sees a wondrous sight, then he wonders about it, and then, when his focus of

attention begins to widen, he notices the Eagle, and immediately approaches it because he

sees it as able to gratify his intense desire to "lerne" from the wondrous sight he has seen.

And once he enters the house, he follows a similar process: noting the presence of

wondrous objects, observing them closely, and then running about as fast as he can, doing

all his "entente" "for to pleyen and for to lere" (2132-3). The initial experience of wonder,

then, grabs the attention and compels observation of the wondrous object. This

observation, coupled with perception of some incomprehensible quality in the object, can

then cause one to wonder about it, and awaken a profound desire to understand.[44]

---

[44] As Gayk observes, "In Chaucer's courtly explorations of wonder, *admiratio* often leads to both *curiositas* and *studiositas*," with curiositas understood as "a desire for unnecessary knowledge" and studiositas as "a virtuous devotion to understanding." Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 151. She cautions, however, that in the *Prioress's Tale* at least, the religious wonder generated in response to the miraculous leads not to investigation or "instruction or edification" but to silence, and to the containment of the unassimilable. Gayk, 152. Gayk connects this distinction to the

Wonder, of course, does not always follow this trajectory, either in the text or outside of it. As a collection of affective and intellectual states, the experience of wonder varies in form and intensity.[45] Sometimes, for example, Geffrey seems to move right to the stage of intense curiosity without experiencing obvious astonishment. Other times, Geffrey describes an object as wondrous without describing himself as actually wondering about it. It may be that in some of these cases, the use of the word "wonder" is used more to describe a potential response than an actual one—a signal to a possible reader or viewer rather than an expression of the actual wonder of the narrator.[46] There are degrees and kinds of wonder and wondering.

Despite certain variations in Geffrey's expressions of wonder, however, the objects that Geffrey describes as wondrous—those that evoke, or might be expected to evoke, the astonishment of wonder or the wondering drive to know—tend to have certain characteristics in common. These characteristics are consistent with Bynum's observations about the strongest and most consistent triggers for wonder in the texts she discusses. As Bynum observes,

> In the chronicles, lives, and stories I have studied, wonder is induced by the
> beautiful, the horrible, and the skillfully made, by the bizarre and rare, by that which

medieval taxonomical distinction between miracles and natural marvels, which leads to Chaucer giving the wonder at natural "miribilia" in romances a different valence than the wonder at "miracula" in miracle stories. Gayk, 151. On this basis, she cautions against flattening the distinction between miraculous things and marvelous objects in studies of Chaucer's works, since these things might not function equally as objects of knowledge Gayk, 153. While Gayk's arguments are valid, I do not observe this distinction in my own analysis, in part because, at least in the *House of Fame*, Geffrey seems to react similarly to potentially miraculous and potentially natural objects. Indeed, as I will discuss, the question of whether an object is divine or mundane in nature is one of the things that can potentially mark it as wondrous.

[45] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 16; Bynum, "Wonder," 15.

[46] See Bynum, "Wonder," 15.

challenges or suddenly illuminates our expectations, by the range of difference, even the order and regularity, found in the world. But marveling and astonishment as reactions seem to be triggered most frequently and violently by what Bernard of Clairvaux called *admirabiles mixturae*: events or phenomena in which ontological and moral boundaries are crossed, confused, or erased. Singularity per se, or the absence of a "cause," is not enough.[47]

Why is it not enough? Because more than simply being a response to that which is frightening or aesthetically pleasing, wonder, in medieval accounts, is "a significance-reaction: a flooding with awe, pleasure, or dread owing to something deeper, lurking in the phenomenon . . . wonder was a response to something novel and bizarre that seemed both to exceed explanation and to indicate that there might be reason (significance—not necessarily cause) behind it."[48]

In keeping with this assessment, Geffrey often describes as wondrous things that are beautiful and things that are strange.[49] But what seems to bring these things into the realm of the wondrous, rather than merely the surprising or the aesthetically pleasing, is the fact that they are not easily integrated into Geffrey's prior conception of how the world works. These wonders are ontological or epistemological puzzles, hybrids of a kind not seen in nature, sights that are impossible to classify according to pre-existing categories.[50]

---

[47] Bynum, 21.

[48] Bynum, 24.

[49] It should be noted that Geffrey does not necessarily describe himself as undergoing the full range of wonder-reactions when viewing these wondrous things. But his labeling them as such follows a distinctive pattern that suggests what kinds of objects evoke wonder in him, and what kinds may be supposed to evoke a similar impression of wonder in the reader.

[50] In her analysis of the wondrous in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, Shannon Gayk likewise observes that Chaucer "locates the possibility of wonder at the crux of object and thing, animate and inanimate, intelligible and indeterminate." Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 139. As Daston and Park put it: "To register wonder was to register a breached boundary, a classification subverted. The making and breaking of categories—sacred and profane; natural and artificial; animal, vegetable and

In this sense, they can be understood as "things," as Michael Van Dussen describes them—not in the sense of material objects, but rather in the other senses of "thing" available to Middle English readers—an "object of wonder" or "a matter of interest or concern."[51] While Van Dussen focuses on Chaucer's treatment of things as "objects of interest" rather than principally objects of wonder, there is an overlap between his description of Chaucer's approach to *things* and my understanding of the objects of wonder and the effects they evoke.[52] As Van Dussen puts it, the word "thing" and its cognates "were

---

mineral; sublunar and celestial—is the Ur-act of cognition, underpinning all pursuit of regularities and discovery of causes." Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 14. Bynum similarly notes that in medieval writings, "Wonder was moreover associated with paradox, coincidence of opposites; one finds *mira* (wondrous) again and again in the texts alongside *mixta* (mixed or composite things), a word that evokes the hybrids and monsters also found in the literature of entertainment." Bynum, "Wonder," 7. Analyzing the portrayal of wonder in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Bynum likewise concludes that according to his works, "we wonder at what we cannot in any sense incorporate, or consume, or encompass in our mental categories; we wonder at mystery, at paradox, at *admirabiles mixturae*. The ecstasy and stupor Bernard calls *admiratio* is triggered above all, he says, by three hybrids beyond nature and comprehension: the mixture of God and man, of woman and virgin, of belief with falsity in our hearts." Bynum, 12. Bernard of Clairvaux's understanding of wonder is distinct from Chaucer's in many ways (he contrasts wonder with curiosity, for example, whereas Chaucer tends to link the two), but they share on some level the idea that the wondrous is that which (at least initially) resists comprehension and categorization. Bynum, 11. For a list of categories of things that were commonly treated as "marvels" in medieval literature, see: Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1985; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 36–37. The list includes natural and manmade sites, "humans and anthropomorphs," animals both "natural" and "imaginary," "Mischwesen" ("Half-human, half-animal creatures), objects with special properties, and "historical personages. Le Goff, 36–37. Also present in medieval accounts are categories of marvels including "everyday marvels," "symbolic and moralistic marvels," "political marvels," "scientific marvels," and the exemplary marvels of history. Le Goff, 39–40.

[51] Van Dussen, "Things," 477, citing *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), s.v. *thing*, 12d, 9a. Gayk likewise draws upon "thing theory" in her analysis of the wonders in the Prioress's Tale, although she notes that according to Bill Brown's theorization of the "thing," the ontologically ambiguous "thing" is not properly an object, but rather occupies a space between subject and object. Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 140–41. See: Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258. In my own analysis, I do not observe this distinction, although ambiguity of subjecthood or objecthood might be understood as one of the productive ambiguities that marks a thing as wondrous in this work.

[52] Indeed, although Van Dussen chooses to broaden the discourse on Chaucerian *things* beyond the topic of "marvels, wonders, and the miraculous," he also acknowledges that these things have been

used frequently" in premodern contexts "to refer to abstract matters: that which is yet to be

determined or integrated into human ontological and epistemological systems;[53] the *thing*

as social or metaphysical problem."[54] A thing may begin as a concrete, observable object,

but "when perceived as foreign, surprising, or unexplained, it becomes an object of interest,

a stimulating *problem* that its observers feel compelled to resolve."[55] Thus, these things

need not be material objects. Rather:

> For Chaucer and his contemporaries, in fact, a *thing* need not have its reference
> point in a physical object at all but can refer to hypothetical premises that have
> reference points in imagined material objects, processes, and abstractions. A thing
> may be a thought experiment, the "school-matter" that exercised the scholastics—a
> problem of logic or metaphysics, often pertaining to form, matter, and change, that
> frustrates until it is resolved or continues to frustrate as an insoluble. Such *things*
> represent possible disruptions in the divine or natural order, made manifest in what
> at least initially appears to be an inconsistent system of logic or language. The
> epistemological and ontological problems that populate Chaucer's oeuvre are
> frequently the occasions (the *matter*) of puzzlement, wonder, and other stimuli to
> explanation; things that sit uneasily in the position of passive object-hood or mere
> instrumentality.[56]

Things, then, understood as ontologically or epistemologically puzzling "matters of

concern," often, but not always pertaining to the physical,[57] can evoke wonder, as well as

---

a privileged focus of scholarship precisely because "These are often the kinds of things that initiate
a search for explanation, or that prompt new collectives of humans and nonhumans." Van Dussen,
"Things," 480.

[53] In her analysis of the wondrous in the *Prioress's Tale*, Gayk similarly notes how wonder stems
from "ontologically ambiguous" and "inassimilable things" that defy "categorization or
apprehension" Gayk, "'To wondre upon this thyng,'" 138–40.

[54] Van Dussen, "Things," 477.

[55] Van Dussen, 477.

[56] Van Dussen, 478.

[57] Van Dussen takes care to establish that when he discusses "*things* in Chaucer," he is:

other states associated with it, such as the drive to understand and to explain. Varying in kind, they share for the wondering observer a common strangeness, a sense that they cross the boundaries of the natural, the possible, the knowable.[58] Despite, or perhaps because of this ontological and epistemological strangeness, the wonders of the *House of Fame* share another key characteristic: all of them are ripe with significance, carrying with them the promise of hidden meaning. This, then, is the crux of the wondrous object: it both resists easy comprehension and promises great rewards of knowledge to the one who strives to understand it.

This can be seen in the Eagle, the first thing in his dream that Geffrey describes as a wonder. There is something about the bird that is hard to classify, something that seems to

---

> not dealing with an analysis of objects of interest "as they really are"—the "real" that exists apart from other beings that populate the world or the "traces" of materiality that, once properly understood, can give us privileged access to the Middle Ages; we are dealing with an analysis of how "matters of concern," many but not all of which involve physicality, present themselves to human perceivers and how that presentation and the responses it stimulates can affect social groupings and subject–object relations. Van Dussen, 478.

[58] Indeed, as Van Dussen goes on to specify:

> Additionally, that which stimulates analysis is often that which appears to be inconsistent with human understanding of the natural order (not necessarily an inconsistency in the natural order per se) . . . A *thing* for Chaucer, and for many of his contemporaries, could be an object whose human perceivers notice as surprising or unintegrated or as functioning differently than they think it is supposed to. Chaucer, in short, is also concerned with the status of specific things that constitute the world as part of system derived from nature, and specifically with those things whose ontological status is not immediately recognizable to those who perceive them." Van Dussen, 478.

See also Le Goff's contention that:

> Marvels consisted in a large part of enlargements or distortions of the normal, natural world . . .But the marvelous was not content merely to surpass nature; there was something in it that was very much antinature. The exaggeration and extravagance of marvelous creatures extended beyond the quantitative into the realm of the qualitative. Metamorphosis, one of the profound features of the marvelous, eludes characterization in terms of the devices used to produce simple 'static' marvels: accentuation, multiplication, association, or distortion." Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, 40–41.

break down natural categories. It is shaped like an eagle, which leads Geffrey to speculate

that it is one: "Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore" (499). "But," he immediately states, "that

hit semed moche more / Then I had any egle seyn." (500-1). Shaped like an eagle, but far

too big to be an eagle, the creature is not easily categorized. This difficulty is enhanced by

the fact that the Eagle's feathers shine so brightly that they seem to be "of gold"—so

brightly that when it flies "faste be the sonne," it appears as though there are two suns in

the sky (503, 497). If it is a living creature, then why does it seem to be made of gold? If it is

an earthly creature, then why does it take on the characteristics of a heavenly body? It

could, of course, be divine. This would explain the way it resembles the sun, as well as the

fact that Geffrey only notices the Eagle after he lifts his eyes in prayer:

> And with devocion,
> Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.
> Thoo was I war, lo, at the laste,
> That faste by the sonne, as hye
> As kenne myght I with myn yë,
> Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore. (494-99)

If the Eagle is divine, however—something beyond nature entering into the natural world,

then this is another breaking of ontological boundaries.[59] Whether natural or divine, its

appearance in response to prayer certainly marks it as an object that is laden with

portentous significance. And so, Geffrey wonders at it. As it happens, he is right to do so.

The Eagle really has been sent by a god (Jupiter), and it really does promise to help him

learn new things. Geffrey's wonder at this mysterious entity allows him to pinpoint a

---

[59] If the Eagle is divine, then its presence may well be regarded as miraculous, and thus inherently wondrous. Indeed, Bynum argues that by the thirteenth century, university intellectuals, building off of the work of Anselm of Canterbury and Augustine, tended to regard wonders and miracles as ontologically distinct, so that natural and man-made things may or may not be regarded as wondrous, depending on the perspective of the viewer, but miracles are objectively wondrous, because they are divine in origin and surpass nature. Bynum, "Wonder," 8–9.

source of significance, and therefore a potential learning opportunity.

The House of Fame, too, provides both an ontological challenge and the promise of great and hidden meaning. When Geffrey first encounters it, he immediately establishes that it is a place without precedent in human experience, one that appears to beyond the capacity of human craftsmen to imitate. As he says,

> . . . al the men that ben on lyve
> Ne han the kunnynge to descrive
> The beaute of that ylke place,
> Ne coude casten no compace
> Swich another for to make,
> that myght of beaute ben hys make,
> Ne so wonderlych yrought (1167-73)

This is in part because the enormous castle appears to be carved entirely from a single gemstone, "wythouten peces or joynynges." (1184-7). It is covered with as many windows as there are snowflakes during a snowfall, and its walls are full of niches in which stand a staggering array of historical and legendary figures—all brought together, impossibly, in a single moment (1191-1236). It is a sight that, understandably, fills Geffrey with wonder. After all, it is an edifice that appears to exceed nature in its shape and construction. And it is inhabited by people who are made of sound itself made visible, a fact which Geffrey, when asked by the Eagle, agrees is "a wonder thyng" (1068-83). This ontological wonder also suggests rich possibilities for learning, both in the building's allegorical overtones and in the status of the House of Fame as a kind of storehouse of knowledge—a vast archive that operates on a different temporal scale than the individual human life, as things become widely known or fade away. One could potentially learn a great deal, there, although for most of his visit, Geffrey is simply caught up in the absorptive experience of wonder— noting every detail that it is feasible to convey to the reader.

Like the House of Fame, Fame herself is wondrous to Geffrey. And Fame's most wondrous traits are those that challenge Geffrey's ontological categories and seem to suggest a meaning beyond themselves. As "A femynyne creature, / That never yformed by Nature / Nas such another thing yseye," Fame certainly seems to be either unnatural or unique within nature (1365-7). The first reason for her strangeness is her wildly variable height, which defies the expected behavior of the bodies of living things. As Geffrey relates, she seems to shift from a miniscule size to a height so great that her head brushes the heavens (1369-75). Certainly, there is no other creature that is able to change its size so dramatically in such a short period of time, nor any that could attain the size of Fame when she she has extended herself fully. More wondrous, still, to Geffrey, is the number of eyes Fame has, "For as feele eyen hadde she / As fetheres upon foules be, / Or weren on the bestes foure / That Goddis trone gunne honoure, / As John writ in th'Apocalips." (1381-5). Her rapidly changing height allows her to bridge the space between earth and sky, and her multitudinous eyes are comparable both to the feathers of birds and the eyes of the four living creatures in the Book of Revelations. Like the Eagle, she occupies a space between the divine and the mundane, between the human and the animal, and thus she seems impossible to categorize.[60]

In addition to suggesting her ontologically puzzling status, these features hint at a hidden, allegorical significance. Her shifting height, for example, might speak to the variable reach of fame or to the proliferation of stories about both heaven and earth. Her multitude of eyes, ears, and tongues might signify her perceptiveness (she sees and hears everything)

---

[60] Boitani likewise notes the conflation of the human and the animal in both Fame and the Eagle, observing, with reference to Le Goff's categories of medieval marvels: "Fame is a monster half human half animal—a 'Mischwesen'—whilst the protagonist's guide is a 'real,' 'natural' animal, the Eagle, who speaks like a human being." Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 176–77.

but also the role of human senses in spreading tales (ordinary people using their tongues to repeat what they see and hear). Like the other wonders, she is a figure that is open to interpretation. But like the other wonders, she is difficult to fully comprehend on the level of the physical, and even on the level of the allegorical, she offers a number of puzzles.[61]

A possible exception to this group of wondrous objects might be the surcoats of the heralds who have come to the House of Fame on behalf of their masters, as these garments seem to lack any kind of ontological strangeness. But they nonetheless pose their own kind of interpretative challenge, and are rich with potential meaning. This is because these surcoats, which are "Embrowded wonderliche ryche," bear upon them their masters' coats of arms (1327). By reading their garments and listening to their petitions, one may discover who sent them, which real-world people of power desire fame, and what they want to be famous for. As Geffrey notes in an example of time-saving *occupatio*, however:

> . . . nought nyl I, so mote y thryve,
> Ben aboute to dyscryve
> Alle these armes that ther weren,
> That they thus on her cotes beren,
> For hyt to me were impossible;
> Men myghte make of hem a bible
> Twenty foot thykke, as I trowe.
> For certeyn, whoso koude iknowe
> Myghte ther alle the armes seen
> Of famous folk that han ybeen
> In Auffrike, Europe, and Asye,
> Syth first began the chevalrie. (1329-40)

The embroidered arms, in addition to being beautiful, are a vast repository of chivalric history. It is, however, too vast a history for any one person to comprehend. Even if one

---

[61] Scholars have, for instance, been puzzled about what the partridge wings on Fame's feet represent, whether an error of translation on Chaucer's part or a significant choice with an ambiguous meaning. John M. Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 987n1392.

sought to identify all of the arms, it would require foreknowledge of their meanings, as unlabeled arms, with their symbolic shapes and colors, are only legible to those who already know what they represent.

It is a more profound interpretative challenge that marks the greatest wonder that Geffrey encounters on his journey: the House of Rumor and its contents. The house, like Fame, is bizarre in form: a structure sixty miles long, "wonderlych" constructed of woven twigs, spinning "as swyft as thought," and resounding with the sound of constant voices trading tidings (1922-24). Its strange appearance certainly inspires wonder in Geffrey; as he states: "Certys,' quod y, 'in al myn age, / ne saugh y such an hous as this.' / And as y wondred me, ywys, / Upon this hous . . ." (1986-19). Like the House of Fame, there is something about the House of Rumor that seems to surpass nature. But Geffrey's eagerness to enter it is driven less by its wondrous appearance and more by the wondrous significance it promises. This can be seen in his request to the Eagle: "Y preye the / That thou a while abide me, / For Goddis love, and lete me seen / What wondres in this place been; / For yit, paraunter, y may lere / Som good theron, or sumwhat here / That leef me were, or that y wente." (1993-9). He wishes to see the wonders that are inside the house, but it is because he seeks to "lere" from them. The prospect of learning is what motivates him the most.

Once he gets inside, the "wondermost" spectacle therein is the process by which a single tiding is altered as it passes from person to person, growing in size until it emerges, birdlike, from a window and flies forth into the world. On the surface, this wonder might seem mundane, as it is the product of an everyday occurrence: the speech of ordinary people. But the transformation of sound into creature in the House of Rumor is wondrous

362

in the same way that the transformation of sounds into people is wondrous in the House of Fame. And like Fame and the Eagle, these wonders are hybrids—both of the words of multiple people, and in certain cases, of lies and truth so intermingled that it is impossible to distinguish them.[62] There, as Geffrey relates, one may see "fals and soth compouned / Togeder fle for oo tidynge." (2108-9).[63]

The ontological strangeness of these curious birdlike hybrids is thus a figure for their even greater epistemological strangeness.[64] For in watching their birth, Geffrey is privy to the impossibility of distinguishing truth from lies in a single statement.[65] Even if one is present when a tiding is told, and thus can use context to determine its likely truth-value, one certainly cannot be present for the birth of every rumor, of every new idea. And even an idea that seems to be new—freshly fledged and ready to enter the world—may, as Chaucer shows, have already been repeated many times among many people and thus inevitably distorted in the telling. Nor can one necessarily extract the truth from a mixed tiding—for how can one trace an altered story back to its source when there are no written records of its transformation? Tidings, in the House of Rumor, take their shape in an ever-

---

[62] As Piero Boitani observes, a tiding that begins as "true *or* false," once "joined to its contrary," becomes "inextricably true *and* false." Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 211.

[63] They are thus a form of the *admirabiles mixturae* that Bernard of Clairvaux found so conducive to the experience of wonder. Bynum, "Wonder," 12.

[64] Indeed, reading the House of Rumor as a representation of the unrestrained imagination, Nicholas Watson argues that "*The House of Fame* makes it clear that moral, epistemological, and ontological ambiguities are intrinsic to the ''newe tidinges'' that are the principal work of the imagination in this unstructured dreaming mode." Nicholas Watson, "The Phantasmal Past: Time, History, and the Recombinative Imagination," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 15, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/402774. In this sense, there is something inherently wondrous about the products of the human imagination.

[65] See Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 210–11.

fluid whirlwind of spoken words. And once those thousands of "wynged wondres" are

given their names by Fame and blown about by Eolus's trumpet, there is no telling from

whence they came (2110-20). Their origin is obscured, and if they find their way into the

works of literature whose authors are enshrined in Fame's halls, it may be impossible to

tell the truth from the lies.[66]

As Martin Irvine notes in "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's *House of

Fame*," Fame determines what enters literary discourse because she determines what

spoken words are remembered and repeated (by virtue of being written and re-read) and

which are allowed to be forgotten.[67] The rumors that spread and the tales that are read are

those Fame deems worthy to be circulated. Because much of Fame's material comes to her

from the House of Rumor, however, "Fame disseminates what has already been neutralized

of truth value."[68] As a result, when poets compose new works, based on the words they

have heard in their daily lives or the works Fame has memorialized, they will inevitably

incorporate some of these mixtures of truth and lies into their writing. And if these new

---

[66] Chaucer may, in fact, be dramatizing the way that tidings become written words in his imagery of spoken words transforming into an image of their speaker in the House of Fame. These authorial images are clothed in red and black, and this has frequently been associated with the black lettering and red rubrics of a manuscript page. See, for example: Kathy Cawsey, "Vernacular Transformation of the Latin Inheritance: Chaucer's *House of Fame*" (Boydell & Brewer, D. S. Brewer, 2020), 35, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv105bbtc.6; Van Dussen, "Things," 484. This suggests that the narratives that become famous, whatever their origins, are preserved in the form of written words. Indeed, Kathy Cawsey regards this imagery as indicating that the truth is really the reverse of what the Eagle suggests: rather than spoken words becoming texts, texts are transmitted via writing and then reread and spoken aloud. Cawsey, "Vernacular Transformation of the Latin Inheritance: Chaucer's *House of Fame*," 35. Regardless of the order of transmission, the hybrids of the House of Rumor are nonetheless profoundly implicated in the transmission of human speech, which will inevitably influence the words that are written and remembered.

[67] Martin Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame," *Speculum* 60, no. 4 (October 1, 1985): 869–71, https://doi.org/10.2307/2853727.

[68] Irvine, 868.

poets' writings are themselves memorialized by Fame, then the cycle begins again. As

Irvine states:

> Each poet is a *novus auctor* who adds something to what he has heard, and what is heard has already been transmitted by Fame as a compound of the true and false.
>   The poets have become famous—their names are known through their writings—and what their texts keep in memory is perpetuated regardless of truth value.[69]

Because of this value-neutral perpetuation of texts, "When texts are seen from within the

House of Fame, any discrimination between kinds of texts or scrutiny of truth claims is

impossible. Fame operates on the level of memory or oblivion and on the level of the

quality of the memory perpetuated—glory or infamy—but not on the level of truth."[70] Once

the hybrids of the House of Rumor are distributed by Fame, there is no telling the true from

the false. As Amtower argues, "It is this mixed content, rather than the 'unadulterated

truths' of canonical writers writing in a privileged vacuum, that flies from the cracks in the

walls towards the House of Fame, there to be associated and canonized with a particular

writerly authority."[71] Indeed, when he approaches the House of Fame in the company of the

Eagle, the great sound Geffrey hears emanating from the edifice comes from the fact that it

---

[69] Irvine, 872.

[70] Irvine, 873.

[71] Laurel Amtower, "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's House of Fame," *Philological Quarterly*, 2000, 279, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2152672952/E04087DC00B145F3PQ/1. Indeed, the comingling of truth and lies in the tidings of the Houses of Rumor and Fame has often been read as a indication that Chaucer is treating literature as either devoid of truth-value or as a fundamentally unreliable source of objective truth, based on its mixed status. See, for example: Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), 25–41, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002471519; Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 24–26, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000461967; Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 210–11; Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 67; John J. McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity: Literary Comparisons in Chaucer and Other Late-Medieval Writing* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Presses, 2000), 64–69, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015047535458.

is, as the Eagle says, "ful of tidynges, / Bothe of feir speche and chidynges, And of fals and soth compouned." (360).[72]

These, then, are the greatest of wonders, both because of their significance as the "raw material of tales" from which narratives are ultimately constructed and because of the impossibility of their ever being definitively classified as truth or lies.[73] The House of Rumor is a repository of potential information that is always ambiguous, available to be recruited into larger narratives but never to be fully understood or classified. And when faced with this inexhaustible wellspring of wonder, Geffrey dives right in, relating: "I alther-fastest wente / About, and dide al myn entente / Me for to pleyen and for to lere, / And eke a tydynge for to here" (2131-34). Wonder is desirable because learning is desirable, and wondrous things are laden with the potential for learning.

In contrast, the objects of Geffrey's curiosity that are not labeled as wondrous are often less puzzling and more easily categorized than those that he calls wonderful. We see this in his response to the Temple of Venus, which is never explicitly described as wondrous.[74] The construction of the temple is certainly interesting, as are the objects in it,

---

[72] Although Geffrey can hear these tidings from the outside, however, he does not seem to find any tidings to wonder about within the House of Fame itself, perhaps because, having not yet ventured to the House of Rumor, he has not yet seen how they are formed, and thus cannot fully appreciate their wondrous nature. While in the House of Fame, he is able, for example, to remark on the fact that some poets say that Homer wrote lies, but he attributes this allegation to "envye" between poets rather than to the mixed material from which Homer must have written (1475-80). And his mention of the fact that some authors say Homer's work is "but fable" because it contains lies glosses over the idea that a work need not be entirely true or entirely false (1480).

[73] Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 211.

[74] It could be the case, of course, that Geffrey is feeling wonder but not mentioning it. After all, the experience of wonder is not only indicated by the word itself, as Bynum notes: "texts may give us access to reactions less through adjectives attached to nouns (that is, by calling something "wonderful," "dreadful," etc.) than by indicating the responses of an implicit reader or viewer, or by describing acts and objects intended to provoke responses. Finding wonder- words is easy; finding

since its walls are made of glass, and it is filled with

> . . . moo ymages
> Of gold, stondynge in sondry stages,
> And moo ryche tabernacles,
> And with perre moo pynacles,
> And moo curious portreytures ,
> And queynte maner of figures
> Of olde werk, then I saugh ever. (121-7)

This would seem to parallel the wonderful and astonishing House of Fame, with its unusual

construction (beryl walls) and many rich wonders (interiors thickly plated with gold and

set with jewels) (1184-5, 1342-53). Both places are also different than anything Geffrey has

seen before, an clear pre-requisite for a wondrous object. As can be seen in Geffrey's

responses to these places, however, the quality of the difference matters. After first

describing the Temple of Venus, Geffrey relates:

> . . . certeynly, I nyste never
> Wher that I was, but wel wyste I
> hyt was of Venus redely,
> The temple; for in portreyture
> I sawgh anoon-ryght hir figure
> Naked fletynge in a see (128-133)

Although the temple and its icons are uniquely lavish examples of their particular kinds,

they are easy recognizable for what they are. Geffrey does not know where the temple is,

but he can clearly tell that it is a temple, based on the objects within it, and whose temple it

is, based on the iconography. There is no difficulty here in categorizing or understanding it.

Furthermore, once he has left the temple, Geffrey displays no great curiosity about

its nature or uncertainty about how to classify it. As he recounts:

A, Lord,' thoughte I, 'that madest us,

---

wonder is far more complicated." Bynum, "Wonder," 15. There does, however, seem to be a
different quality to Geffrey's responses to wondrous and non-wondrous objects of interest, as well
as a difference in the objects themselves, as I will go on to explain.

> Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
> Of ymages, ne such richesse,
> As I saugh graven in this chirche;
> But not wot I who did hem wirch,
> Ne where I am, ne in what contree.
> But now wol I goo out and see,
> Ryght at the wicket, yf y kan
> See owhere any stiryng man
> That may me telle where I am. (470-9)

It is true that he has never seen such noble images or such rich surroundings, and it is true that their beauty compels him to evoke God when contemplating them. His only questions, however, are about who made them and where he is—questions that could be easily answered by "any stiryng man" who knows the area. There is little wonder in the temple for him, because even though it is beautiful, it is eminently knowable. His interest in it is primarily aesthetic.[75]

One may productively contrast this with his simpler response to the "wonderlych" House of Rumor, which is intensely strange in its construction and its size, and which seems hardly to follow the laws of physics. After he has looked it over, Geffrey simply states: "Certys . . . in al myn age, / ne saugh y such an house as this." (1986-7). He does not say that he has never seen such a rich house or such a noisy house or such an intricate house. He has never seen any house like this at all. It is so far outside his everyday understanding of what a *house* is that it might be difficult to even classify it as such. And whereas he is mildly curious about who made the lovely things in the Temple of Venus, he is almost desperate in his desire for the Eagle to let him explore the House of Rumor, praying him "For Goddis love" to let him see inside of it (1993-6). Here is not just beauty,

---

[75] This is not to say that one may not learn about and from that which is not wondrous. Geffrey is a curious narrator, and he notices details and seeks answers even about objects that he does not describe as "wonders." It may be that in the Temple of Venus, we see a milder form of wonder, a kind of aestheticized interest in an object that fails to rise to the level of the truly strange.

but also wonder.

Wonder, then, signals the presence of something marvelously unknown—something that has the potential to disrupt the viewer's conventional categories. For this reason, wonder has a special place in the House of Fame as a learning tool. We get a hint of the pedagogical character of wonder when Geffrey disappointedly tells another visitor to the House of Fame that it does not have the tidings he wants. As he says:

> . . . he that me made
> To comen hyder, seyde me,
> Y shulde bothe here and se
> In this place wonder thynges;
> But these be no suche tydynges
> As I mene of . . . For wel y wiste ever yit,
> Sith that first y hadde wit,
> That somme folk han desired fame
> Diversely, and loos, and name.
> But certeynly, y nyste how
> Ne where that Fame duelled, er now,
> And eke of her descripcioun,
> Ne also her condicioun,
> Ne the ordre of her dom,
> Unto the tyme y hidder com (1890-1906).

Geffrey is disappointed that the wonders he saw did not include the tidings he was seeking. And in retrospect, he has learned very little that was truly new to him, since he already *understood* the human drive for fame. However, almost all of the things that *are* new to him—that he has *learned* in the House of Fame—are things that he has explicitly described as wondrous in some way. He did not know before where Fame dwelled, but while he is in the House of Fame, he describes her dwelling as "wonderlych yrought" (1173). He did not know what she looked like, but once he sees her, he describes her features as a "wonder" (1378). He did not know how she lived or how she passed judgment, but he describes the blowing of Eolus's horn, by which Fame's judgments are widely dispersed, as "as lowde as

any thunder, / That every wight hath of hit wonder, / So brode hyt ran or that hit stente"

(1173, 1378, 1681-3). Geffrey's wonder, in this section of the text, functions as a kind of

signpost to indicate the presence of material from which he has something to learn. And

these wondrous sights have stuck in his memory, much like the exterior of the House of

Fame, whose "substance" persists in Geffrey's mind even after the end of his dream (1181).

For the individual who wishes to learn and understand, then, the experience of

wonder can function as a potent aid. By calling attention to that which is personally

unknown to the reader, it signals a uniquely personal learning opportunity. Because it

enables one to focus deeply on the wondrous object, and gather and retain information

about it, it aids in the processes of observation and memory that facilitate learning. And

because one wonders at baffling objects, those that are filled with potential significance, it

gives one the opportunity, through intense contemplation of these objects, to gain insights

with the potential to influence how one understands one's world.

Reading and Wonder

The experience of wonder, then, is beneficial for those who wish to seek out opportunities

to learn. And this benefit extends to the wonder generated by the experience of reading.

For many of the things Geffrey sees in his dream, the objects that inspire wonder within

him, are themselves the products of books.[76] Chaucer's depiction of the wondrous eagle

who guides Geffrey throughout his journey, for example, is influenced by figures from the

---

[76] On the "bookish" nature of Geffrey's dream in the *House of Fame*, see: John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 28, 51–52; Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 216; Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*, 28–29, 157n8.

Divine Comedy.[77] His description of the wondrous goddess Fame is based in part on Virgil's

portrayal of her in the *Aeneid* as a winged goddess with many tongues who can stretch

from earth to heaven.[78] And his descriptions of the wondrous houses of Fame and Rumor

are influenced by Ovid's description of Fame's residence in his *Metamorphoses.*[79]

Not only are these wonders derived from books, they are derived from books that

the narrator, Geffrey, is explicitly or implicitly said to have read. In the Temple of Venus, for

example, Geffrey states that anyone who wishes to learn more about Dido's story should

"Rede Virgile in Eneydos [*Aeneid*] / Or the Epistle [*Heroides*] of Ovyde" (377-8). When

recommending further reading on the topic of hell, he mentions that those who wish to

know more about it should read "On Virgile or on Claudian, / Or Daunte, that hit telle kan"

(449-50). And when explaining the location of Fame's dwelling, the Eagle tells Geffrey: "so

thyn oune bok hyt tellith," and proceeds to give a description of the House of Fame that is

borrowed directly from the *Metamorphoses* (712).[80] In the space of his dream, figures from

---

[77] The Eagle, for example, is a well-known borrowing from Dante: his appearance and the manner of his introduction are influenced by *Purgatorio* 9, in which the Dante-narrator has a dream that a golden eagle swoops down, "terrible as lightning" ("terribil come fólgor"), and carries him into the sky. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, vol. 2 of <i>The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.29; Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 981n499-508, 982n534-39; J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer's* Book of Fame*: An Exposition of "The House of Fame"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 50, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005289635. As a guide, he also incorporates characteristics of Virgil and Beatrice, and some of his words to Chaucer parallel those of the Dante-narrator's guides. Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 982n557, 985n992; Bennett, *Chaucer's* Book of Fame, 50–51.

[78] Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 987n1368-1392.

[79] Fyler, 983n712, 985n1025, 985n1029, 985n1037-41, 989n1925-85. In *Chaucer and Ovid*, Fyler likewise notes a parallel between a description of the goddess Fame in Alanus de Insulis's *Anticlaudianus* and Chaucer's mention of the mixture of lies and truth that can be heard from Fame's House. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 30.

[80] Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 983n712.

the books Geffrey has read are presented as objects of wonder.

It is, of course, almost certainly not as wondrous to read about a talking eagle as it would be to actually talk to one. One might not experience the same degree of ontological wonder at the marvels described in books.[81] Nonetheless, many books do contain descriptions of wonders that offer themselves to the examination of the reader. For example, the marvels described in travel narratives are wondrous and pleasurable, as Michelle Karnes argues, precisely *because* their authors render their ontological status unclear: "Possibly real and possibly not, they ask for a reader who is willing to enjoy uncertainty rather than merely pretending to do so."[82] The miraculous tales of saints' lives are similarly calculated to evoke wonder in the reader, although their authors might conceive of the hoped-for ends of such wonder differently from the authors of entertainment literature.[83] And no matter what the content of the work, the epistemological wonder of the hybrids in the House of Rumor is always available to the reader. Fame, after all, does not discriminate between truth and lies when she is deciding which words to preserve.[84] The words and stories that are spoken, written, read, repeated, and rewritten, having passed many times through the House of Rumor, are laden with

---

[81] For an argument that books can be understood as possessing an ontologically puzzling status in the Middle Ages more generally, as well as in Chaucer's writing see: Van Dussen, "Things," 481–85.

[82] Karnes, "The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction," 212–13. As Karnes explains, while travel narratives only require their readers to respond to their marvels with a "maybe" or a "probably not," there is always the possibility that the wonders they describe are real: "Their special power lies in that possibility, and in the difficulty of discounting it conclusively." Karnes, 216.

[83] See Bynum, "Wonder," 10–11.

[84] Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory," 873.

these wondrous hybrids.[85] And there is much in books that is paradoxical and strange: that

might not only go against what one knows of nature, but may very well complicate what

one knows of genre, of human behavior, of what is reasonable or appropriate or moral or

beautiful. A marvelous travel account or a miraculous saint's life might evoke a kind of

wonder in the reader, but the everyday paradoxes of human speech and writing are equally

wonderful.[86] Whatever the source, the experience of wonder will always point towards

potential learning. In order to learn more from the material one reads, then, it may be

beneficial for one to wonder: both at stories, and about them. It does not go without saying,

however, that readers will approach the texts they read with a sense of wonder, that they

---

[85] Irvine, 872–73. An interesting parallel between the idea of rumors being composed of lies and truth, and of poetry being likewise constructed can be found in one of Chaucer's sources, Alanus de Insulis's *Anticlaudianus*. As Fyler notes, Chaucer closely imitates this work's description of the Goddess Fame when describing the fact that Fame's house is full of tidings "of fals and soth compouned." Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 30. As Alanus relates: "'Nuncia Fama uolat et ueris falsa maritans' (VII.305) [the herald Rumor flies, marrying false things to true]." Alanus de Insulis, *Anticlaudianus*, ed. R. Bossuat (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955), VIII.305, qtd. and trans.in Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 30. However, as Fyler notes, Alanus uses very similar language to describe Virgil's poetry: "'Virgilii musa mendacia multo colorat / Et facie ueri contextit pallia falso' (I.142-43) [Vergil's poetry colors many lies, and interweaves his mantles of falsehood with the appearance of truth]." Alanus de Insulis, *Anticlaudianus*, I.142-43; qtd. and trans. in Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 30–31. The assertion that classical authors mix lies and truth in their works was commonly made by medieval commentators. Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 31. But here, Chaucer seems to be pushing it forward in time, suggesting that lies and truth may in fact be mingled in all human narratives.

[86] In her analysis of the *Squire's Tale*, for example, Michelle Karnes notes how Chaucer links the effects of wonder at puzzling objects with the effect of metaphors on the mind, in that both produce striking images and inspire "creative inquiry." As she puts it, metaphor, with its play of sameness and difference: "presents a challenge to comprehension, but a diverting and instructive one. Also, by generating a productive confusion, it provokes investigation much like wonder itself. It is a fitting response to a marvel and also a marvel in its own right." Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 482. She goes on to argue that "metaphors play on the difference between what things are and what they seem, and that is why they resemble marvels, which rely on the same disparity to elicit wonder." Karnes, 483. Karnes discusses the status of metaphors as marvels, both in the *Squire's Tale* and in medieval philosophy more generally, in most detail on pages 481-483. Peter W. Travis's chapter on metaphor in *Disseminal Chaucer* is also informative here: Peter W. Travis, "Chaucer's Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor," in *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 169–200.

will look for the wondrous in what they read, or that they will tolerate wonder when it

comes upon them, rather than retreating from it in disgust or fear.[87]

In the following sections, then, I will discuss how, in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer

makes a case for the various kinds of value wonder may have for the reader and the

drawbacks and limitations of certain approaches to wonder. I will be dividing the three

books of the *House of Fame* into five parts, in order to make the argument that each part

presents a different, but linked, picture of the relationship between wonder, learning, and

reading. The primary link connecting these vignettes is Chaucer's narrator, Geffrey, whose

perspective on wonder and its relationship to reading shifts as a result of his experiences

over the course of the poem. Together, these vignettes display the benefit of prolonging the

experience of wonder by deferring conviction, the limitations of a wonder-less reading

experience, the process by which one may learn by rationalizing wonder, the consequences

of excess categorization upon the experience of wonder, and the creative and pedagogical

benefits of wonder for the reader.

Part 1: The Introduction

This first section concerns the Introduction to the *House of Fame*, a portion of the poem

consisting of lines 1-110. In these lines, Chaucer sets the tone for the poem as a whole and

introduces the topic of wonder. It is important to note that chronologically, the

Introduction represents the latest point of Geffrey's experience, as he looks back on and

---

[87] As Daston and Park observe, scholastic philosophical discussions of wonder often associate it with fear, variously based upon the fear that the wonderer experiences towards the object he cannot understand, the physiological similarity of the wonder-response to the fear-response, or even a philosopher's "fear" of wonder itself, from which he flies to philosophy and knowledge. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 110, 112–13.

introduces his dream. The approach to wonder that Chaucer first presents to the reader, then, is one that we will see Geffrey develop across the course of the poem as a whole. It is not necessarily the best or the only way of thinking about wonder and learning, but it represents a very different perspective than the one with which he starts his journey.

The topic of this initial vignette is the preservation of wonder—both the benefits of remaining in a state of wonder and the potential costs of foreclosing this state too soon. Why might one need to work to preserve one's sense of wonder? Because the very knowledge and understanding that wonder leads to may also compete with and potentially replace it. Indeed, in many texts, Bynum detects a sentiment, though not absolute, that "the opposite of *admiratio* was in some sense the *scientia*, or knowledge, to which it led."[88] As she puts it in her introduction: "To medieval thinkers, human beings cannot wonder at what is not there; but neither can we wonder at that which we fully understand."[89] If wonder stems from the perception that one does not understand the wondrous object, then to understand this object would seem to lead to the cessation of wonder.[90]

Bynum is careful to note, however, that medieval depictions of wonder never reduce it entirely to "ignorance rationalized or erased by knowledge."[91] Even those medieval thinkers who were eager to explain the wondrous by attributing it to natural

---

[88] Bynum, "Wonder," 7.

[89] Bynum, 3.

[90] Lightsey perceives this understanding of wonder as operating in the *Squire's Tale*, arguing that in this work, Chaucer "evokes contemporary scholastic thinking on the nature of *mirabilia:* a marvel, whether a natural effect or the product of mechanical deception, is something whose cause is hidden, but which may be understood in terms of cause. And once its cause is understood, the marvel ceases to be marvelous in the traditional sense." Lightsey, "Chaucer's Secular Marvels," 315.

[91] Bynum, "Wonder," 6.

causes, and who suggested that reason and philosophy could be an antidote to wonder, still

tended to see wonder as a valid response to the marvelous, unusual, or significant.[92] And

even those who saw knowledge as the end (both purpose and conclusion) of wonder did

not necessarily suggest that achieving this knowledge was easy or that one ought to stop

with understanding a single wondrous object. As Michelle Karnes explains, although

Aristotle suggests that wonder stems from ignorance and a desire to know, he also "makes

it clear that one advances through wonder to increasingly difficult questions, as about the

cosmos and the origins of the universe."[93] Wonder can lead one to gather knowledge, this

knowledge can in turn lead to more wonder, and so on and so forth. Karnes notes similarly

that "while wonder might eventually give way to knowledge, the requirements for full

understanding were exceedingly hard to meet by medieval standards," citing Aquinas's

assertion that inquiry into the wondrous does not cease until one discovers the cause of the

wondrous object—and since God is the first cause, this inquiry cannot end until one knows

God, truly a daunting feat.[94] True knowledge of ultimate causes is not something a person

can easily achieve.

     Not all inquirers into wondrous objects, however, have such high standards or such

---

[92] Bynum, 7–10, 13–14. See also Van Dussen, who argues that:

> Although Chaucer tends toward a kind of materialism in which the universal gives way to the particular or concrete, he leaves open the possibility of justified wonder at the exceptional or unintegrated and of the human intellect as incapable of discerning the causality of particular phenomena. In this sense he is like the high- and late-medieval scholastic theologians who took a skeptical view of miracles and wonders though, like them, never going so far as to deny the possibility that legitimate disruptions or accelerations of the natural order could occur. Problems arise in cases of deluded human perception and *premature* human credulity (not credulity itself). Van Dussen, "Things," 478–79.

[93] Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 470.

[94] Karnes, 471.

patience with ascending the ladder of knowledge. This can be seen vividly in Chaucer's

Squire's Tale.[95] In this tale, king Cambyuskan is presented with four wondrous objects: a

mirror that shows the future, a sword that inflicts wounds that only it can heal, a ring that

grants the wearer knowledge of healing herbs and the language of birds, and a life-sized

brass horse that is capable of flight. Upon witnessing this horse, the people in

Cambyuskan's court are filled with wonder and begin to speculate intently as to its as to its

nature, purpose, and workings. They do likewise with the mirror, the ring, and the sword.

While the true natures of the objects are never established or explained, some of the

viewers nonetheless become satisfied with their conclusions about the objects and

therefore cease to wonder about them.[96] Such is the case of those who liken the wondrous

objects to glass made from the ashes of ferns:

> But nathelees somme seiden that it was
> Wonder to maken of fern-asshen glas,
> And yet nys glas nat lyk asshen of fern;
> But, for they han yknowen it so fern,
> Therfore cesseth hir janglyng and hir wonder.
> As soore wondren somme on cause of thonder,
> On ebbe, on flood, on gossomer, and on myst,
> And alle thyng, til that the cause is wyst. (V 253-260)

Contenting themselves with the knowledge that some things, like glass, seem marvelous

until their causes are known, some of the viewers are content to inquire no further about

these new objects. They slake their wonder with the understanding that such things, like

---

[95] As Michelle Karnes comments: "The tale does not nearly satisfy so high a standard [as Aquinas's] when it comes to its own marvels." Karnes, 471.

[96] See Karnes's observation that "*The Squire's Tale* is unusual among romances because it asks about the origins and mechanisms of its marvels, but in no meaningful sense does it answer those questions." Karnes, 472.

glass, certainly have explanations.[97] Chaucer likens this response to a more general

phenomenon, whereby people tend to wonder about a variety of things until they believe

they understand their causes, at which point their wonder ceases. Surely not all of these

people have attained full knowledge of God or the heights of philosophy. They have merely

found an explanation they are satisfied with, and, having done so, are willing to stop

wondering. In this way, knowledge—or the belief one possesses knowledge—can edge out

wonder.

For one who seeks wonder as a means to a discrete intellectual end, there is nothing

inherently wrong with this: wonder points out a gap in what one knows, and one uses one's

desire to understand as motivation to fill this gap. The problem is that ceasing to wonder

about an object does not necessarily mean that one really understands that object: just that

one *believes* one does. Here, then, is the risk of rushing to replace wonder with the

conviction of knowledge. When one ceases to wonder, there is always the possibility that

one has missed something.

In contrast with this state of conviction, the state of wonder is characterized by its

indeterminacy. It is a state where there are options but not decisions, questions but not yet

answers, where information is gathered but not necessarily assembled, where one may

desire knowledge but where one does not yet have it.[98] Choosing to remain in this state

means delaying the certitude that one fully understands an object. But it also gives one

---

[97] See Karnes, 470.

[98] It may be that the indeterminacy, vacillation, and inconclusiveness that many have noted in the *House of Fame*, its reluctance to locate absolute truth in literature, authority, prophecy, dreams, or experience, and its persistent refusal to clearly answer the questions it poses, may actually conduce towards the cultivation of a state of wonder in the reader. For a sampling of sources that discuss these characteristics of the poem, see note 71 above.

space to consider different aspects of the object, as well as different potential

interpretations and explanations, before certainty shuts them down.[99] It is this choice that

Geffrey makes in the introduction to his dream-vision, and it is this choice that he makes

available to his readers throughout the *House of Fame*.

In the opening of the poem, Geffrey suggests that he wonders at the causes and

categories of dreams because he lacks knowledge. This can be seen in the opening lines,

where he remarks that the causes and nature of dreams are a wonder to him and proceeds

to supply a jumbled list of the terms used to classify dreams in order to convey his

bafflement (1-52).[100] He states that he does not know:

> Why that is an avision
> And why this a revalacion,
> Why this a drem, why that a sweven,
> And noght to every man lyche even;
> Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
> I not; but whoso of these miracles
> The causes knoweth bet than I,
> Devyne he, for I certeinly
> Ne kan hem noght . . . (1-15)

His difficulty in classifying dreams according to these established labels is consistent with

the idea that wonder is evoked by objects that are difficult to categorize and that seem to

be miraculous in nature. Presumably, if he were to learn more about dreams and their

---

[99] For a fuller discussion of the creative and intellectually generative properties that wondrous objects have by virtue of their indeterminacy, see: Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor."

[100] Chaucer borrows these terms for the classification of dreams in part from Macrobius, and in part from other literary sources. Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 978n1-52. As Fyler notes, however, "Chaucer's usage of dream-terminology is confusing, apparently on purpose." Fyler, 978n1-52. Here, Chaucer plays fast and loose with categories of dreams, drawing distinctions between terms like "drem" and "sweven" that he tends to use interchangeably and treating the potentially overlapping categories of "avision," "revelacion," and "oracle" as entirely separate. Fyler, 987n1-52. The effect of this is to present Geffrey unable or unwilling to distinguish between or correctly apply these categories.

causes, he would be better able to label these phenomena and therefore to replace his

wonder with knowledge. Indeed, in the Aristotelian sense, it is an understanding of *cause*

that allows one to attain rational knowledge.[101] Lacking this causal knowledge, Geffrey can

only wonder.

In the following lines, Geffrey furthers the idea that his wonder is caused by

deficient knowledge when he suggests that the reason for his wonder is a deliberate lack of

effort to learn more about its objects. After relating that he does not know the causes of

dreams, Geffrey states that:

> . . . I certeinly
> Ne kan hem noght, ne never thinke
> To besily my wit to swinke
> To knowe of hir significaunce
> The gendres, neyther the distaunce
> Of tymes of hem, ne the causes,
> Or why this more then that cause is (14-20)

Here, he presents his lack of knowledge as purposeful. He does not know the causes of

dreams, or the "gendres" of their "significaunce," because he does not "swinke" his "wit" too

"besily" about them. Again, then, he suggests that his wonder is the product of ignorance, in

---

[101] As Edwards explains:

> To the extent that causes cannot be found, dreams are not intelligible species or proper objects of knowledge; they are not part of the rational knowledge of *scientia* as scholastic and Aristotelian thinkers conceived it. Knowledge through causes depends on the abstraction of form or species to acquire a knowledge of entities or kinds of things. Dreams, the narrator tells us, belong instead to the realm of the particular, to experience (*experimentum*) and opinion from which no reliable inference can be made. Unable to identify the sources of dreams, the narrator cannot determine their status as true or false representations, and he consequently ponders a curiously neutral ground on which language and reasoning confront the ambiguity of dream life. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer*, 95.

The relationship of causal knowledge to knowledge more generally, and the status of wonder as a lack of causal knowledge was in part what led scholastic philosophers to regard it with a certain degree of suspicion. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 113.

this case deliberately maintained by virtue of his refusal to know. Given the fact that

Geffrey will later describe the House of Fame as so wondrous that it "maketh al my wyt to

swinke," however, his declaration that he is uninterested in exploring the wondrous causes

of dreams seems strange. Wonder, in this poem, begets great thought. Inspired by the

perception of hidden significance, it evokes a powerful desire to learn. And as the

introduction progresses, Geffrey makes it clear that he has actually "swinked" his wit a

great deal over the topic of dreams.

Indeed, immediately following this disavowal of an interest in knowing the causes

and significance of dreams, Geffrey begins listing a collection of contemporary theories of

their causes. He discusses the possibility that different kinds of dreams are caused by

differing levels of humors, various life circumstances, illness, imprisonment, or changes of

routine, intense emotions, the influence of spirits, or the higher insights of the soul (21-51).

He likewise discusses various kinds of people who might be prone to certain kinds of

dreams, speculating, for example, that lovers might be prone to "avisions" by virtue of their

emotional suffering (36-40). Clearly, he has done his research. After listing these

possibilities, however, he still insists on his ignorance, stating: "why the cause is, nought

wot I." (52).[102]

It might seem as though Geffrey is simply lying, humbly making light of his own

---

[102] As Jacqueline Miller puts it: "The survey of dream theory at the beginning of the poem is exhaustive, and reveals the speaker's full familiarity with the subject while at the same time he declares, with professed simplicity, his inability to deal with it." Jacqueline T. Miller, "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *The Chaucer Review* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093821. See also Wolfgang Clemen's argument: "Chaucer pretends that all these theories about dreams and the discussion of them is no affair of his, and yet he brings his whole knowledge—and he proves more 'learned' than most of his contemporaries—to bear on the matter." Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 75.

labor of study. I would argue, however, that he is being entirely truthful. I base this claim on

the conclusion of his proem, in which he states:

> Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys
> That trete of this and other werkes,
> For I of noon opinion
> Nyl as now make mensyoun,
> But oonly that the holy roode
> Turne us every drem to goode!
> For never sith that I was born,
> Ne no man elles me beforn,
> Mette, I trowe stedfastly,
> So wonderful a drem as I (53-62)

Here, we see that Geffrey is not denying that he has read the works of the "grete clerkys" he

mentions. Nor does he disclaim any familiarity with their theories. He, personally, however,

is choosing to not to "make mensyoun" of any opinion on the subject, except for the

repetition of his wish that "the holy roode / Turne us every drem to goode!" (57-8).

When he says that he neither knows, nor strives to know, the causes of dreams,

then, he is not making a statement of ignorance or intellectual laziness. Rather, he is

making an epistemological claim.[103] He knows perfectly well what theories other authors

---

[103] Indeed, Laurence Eldredge regards this passage as expressing an "implicit epistemology" associated with the skepticism of the philosophical *Via Moderna*. As Eldredge puts it:

> His attitude toward dream lore is that all of the propositions he mentions are neutral—that is, they may or may not be true, but he is in no position to assert the validity of anyone of them. In fact all he can do is throw up his hands . . . and move on to tell of one particular dream. And in this movement away from theory toward evidence, away from the general toward the particular, we can see additional signs of a follower of the V*ia Moderna*: in the manner of Ockham, understanding is first a matter of an intuitive perception of a singular individual thing. Laurence Eldredge, "Chaucer's *Hous of Fame* and the *Via Moderna*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71, no. 1 (1970): 110, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43342524.

While Eldredge concludes that Chaucer is ultimately dissatisfied with this form of epistemological skepticism (although he does not explicitly reject it), I would argue that he nonetheless presents its use, both as a creative tool and as a facilitator of observation and contemplation. Eldredge, 116.

have put forward to explain the causes of dreams. He knows the names of the categories

that scholars use to taxonomize dreams, and the ways that these categories are applied.

What he does not know, however, is whether or not these theories truly explain the causes

of dreams, whether there is any valid reason to label a certain dream in a certain way, or

whether certain causes can really be tied to certain effects. Nor is he interested in swinking

his wit to try to know these things for certain. What he is interested in is the idea that every

dream be turned to good.[104] Geffrey's lack of knowledge, then, is not caused by a dearth of

information, but by a deliberate deferral of *certainty*. He has gathered information on

dream-theory, but he tactically chooses not to express which of the theories, if any, he

believes sufficient to explain the causes of dreams in general or of his dream in particular.

He has learned a great deal, but he refuses to say that he "knows."

In disclaiming full knowledge and understanding of the causes of dreams, Geffrey is

able to retain his wonder while leaving open continued possibilities for interpreting and

investigating the nature of these phenomena. By refusing to fix himself to a single

explanation, he allows himself to continue exploring, to keep gathering theories and

concepts and ideas without pinning himself down to single one. In doing so, he leaves open

the possibility that his dream may be explicable by all of them—or none of them. He swinks

to learn, but he does not swink to know.

As a result of these epistemological choices, Geffrey opens up a particular

intellectual space for himself. It is a space that looks not at the causes of dreams but instead

---

[104] As Wolfgang Clemen argues in *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, Geffrey's maxim "God turne us every drem to goode" "might be said to represent the position to which he clings and resigns himself, after reviewing the many confusing dream-theories in the Proem—without however committing himself to any one of them. The conjunctive 'for' in the second line acts, indeed, as a preparation; with a naively innocent pose the poet asks what may really lie behind the business of dreaming." Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 74.

to their effects, considered in isolation from these causes—the "goode" that God may turn them to in the dreamer's life, whatever their origin.[105] For when one rigidly categorizes dreams based on their causes, and uses this categorization to limit how the dreams should be interpreted and used, one in essence locks each individual dream into a particular box in terms of whether or not it ought to be taken seriously, what one should do with it, and what results it may produce in a dreamer's life. If a dream is caused by anxiety for example, or by illness or stress, then according to Macrobius's categories, it must certainly be a meaningless *insomnium*, or nightmare.[106] In this case, the only way it could be turned to good is if one ignored it. Similarly, if a particular dream were definitively established to contain divine counsel, and thus classified as a true oracle (*oraculum*), then one would be obligated to treat its disclosures as the absolute truth, and to shape one's future around them.[107] No good could come from ignoring such a dream.

If one approaches dreams with wonder, rather than a desire to classify, however, then dramatic possibilities of interpretation open up for the dreamer. If one treats the nature and origin of a dream is unknown—as, in practice, is true of most dreams[108]—then

---

[105] On the *House of Fame* as a kind of critique of the idea that causality can be definitively or usefully determined, see: Eleanor Johnson, "Against Order: Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Critiques of Causality," in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61–70, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108147682.

[106] A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 9.

[107] Spearing, 10.

[108] As A. C. Spearing puts it:

> The Middle Ages possessed a variety of elaborate methods of classifying dreams according to their causes and their value or lack of value as guides to truth. These systems of classification were highly ingenious, but they had one fundamental drawback: there was almost never any way of telling from a dream itself which category it belonged to. It might

it may signify much more variously than if one endeavored to strictly categorize it, and it may be put to good use in a variety of ways.[109] One may treat it as inspiration for a creative work. One may learn lessons from it about oneself and one's world. One may gain insight into possible futures without the joy or terror of knowing that one's destiny is set in stone. And one may embrace the possibility that these good effects are consistent with God's will for them—without presuming to know.[110]

Rather than disempowering the dreamer, eschewing categorization and embracing

---

look and feel like a true vision of the future caused by divine or planetary influence, when really it was a mere fantasy caused by indigestion or drunkenness or melancholy or the influence of books or even by diabolic means. Only subsequent events would tell whether or not it was really prophetic. Spearing, 74.

Indeed, as Fyler remarks, while medieval dream-categories provide ways to "describe different kinds of dreams," "The problem is that Chaucer is going to recount a particular dream; and as medieval dream theory emphasizes, one cannot say anything authoritative from the perspective of a dream itself about its causes, effects, and truth value. The system . . . fails when it confronts the quandaries of a particular instance." Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 27.

[109] Edwards makes a similar claim, arguing that:

At base the narrator's explanations comprise a realm of discourse around an absent center. Not knowing what causes dreams, the narrator is free to hypothesize any number of reasons, each already conceived as a distant account, leveled by compounding and removed by approximation, for something that he cannot define positively. Like his counterpart in the *Book of the Duchess*, who exists between images and 'nothing,' the narrator finds an economy of signs without implicit purpose or term. He discovers *an area of invention without constraints*." (emphasis mine) Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer*, 98.

[110] This, of course, does not mitigate the real danger of "reading" a deceptive dream as true or a true dream as false and allowing these things to shape one's actions. Such misprision could certainly lead to bodily or spiritual peril. In practice, however, the question of how, exactly, one could determine the origins of a dream, whether a true prophecy, a wicked temptation, or a mysterious psychic phenomenon related to one's daily activities, was not an easy one to answer. See: Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64–65; Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 74. What Chaucer suggests here is that letting go the idea that one can fully know the causes of dreams, and approaching them instead with cautious interest, may lead to far better results than seeking either to identify that one true prophecy among all one's dreams or dismissing, from an excess of anxiety or skepticism, all dreams as utterly without value.

wonder thus expands one's interpretative horizons.[111] It allows one to seek without binding oneself to a particular outcome—to leave room for serendipity in the way one understands the objects of one's wonder and the effects they may have on one's life. And in outlining this particular approach to dream-interpretation, Chaucer opens up the possibility that his readers may approach their own dreams in this way. By providing his readers with a series of potential explanations for dreams and then refusing to proclaim which one is most true, Chaucer gives them space to puzzle through the question on their own and weigh different options.[112] Because he refuses to cast himself as an authority on the topic of dreams, he makes it harder for his readers to treat his opinion as fact, consider themselves edified, and then cease to wonder.[113] And by stating how "wonderliche" his own dream is, he is inviting them to wonder not only at dreams more generally, but at this specific dream he is presenting them with.

---

[111] Indeed, the refusal of choice between competing alternatives is, Sheila Delaney argues, one of the principal characteristics of the *House of Fame* and of a number of Chaucer's subsequent works. The result is a kind of "literary fideism" that is parallel to the "skeptical fideism" of medieval philosophers. Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 113–18, 6.

[112] As others have noted, even within the body of the dream-vision, Chaucer refuses to definitively establish what "kind" of dream Geffrey is having, at least in terms of common dream-categories. See especially: Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 73–89. By refusing to give a clear answer in his work, Chaucer thus invites his readers to wonder.

[113] See Minnis et al.'s reading of this passage:

> The Chaucer-persona modestly admits his inability to solve such difficult matters—which, of course, leaves his literary vision open to interpretation, and the possibility that it may well contain profound truth is also left very much open. Strategic profession of inadequacy actually valorizes a dream-poem. And as part of that process the audience is alerted to the work's richness, its very obscurity and difficulty challenging the reader, making demands on his (for 'his' it usually was) interpretative abilities . . . Thus the responsibility for the determination of the text's meaning is, rather flatteringly, transferred to the textual community. Alastair Minnis, V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 49, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015034437635.

Since they don't have any direct access to the dream itself, however, the invitation

he gives them is to wonder not at his dream, but at his rendition of it: the narrative in

which he describes it to them. They are being asked to wonder at a written *text*.[114] He

wants them to approach it with the same sense of indeterminacy he uses to approach

dreams—to be eager to observe and slow to draw conclusions. And after approaching this

one text with wonder, his readers may find they have acquired a strategy for reading more

generally. Much as wonder at dreams as a whole gives way to wonder at a particular

dream, it is possible that the reverse may occur: that in wondering at this particular text,

one may come to wonder at all of them. And if wondering at dreams can allow one to devise

different interpretations of them and the good they may do in one's life, the same may be

true for books.[115]

---

[114] As T. S. Miller puts it: "In the end, perhaps an author can only hope and pray, "God turne us every drem to goode!" (*HF* 1), with "drem" of course standing in for dream vision, and dream vision standing in for text." T. S. Miller, "Writing Dreams to Good: Reading as Writing and Writing as Reading in Chaucer's Dream Visions," *Style* 45, no. 3 (2011): 541, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.45.3.528.

[115] A. C. Spearing hints at this possibility in his own analysis of the *House of Fame*, reasoning that since it is difficult to distinguish between true and false, beneficial or harmful dreams, the same might be said to apply to dream-vision poems, which likewise function as imaginative fictions. If one cannot definitively determine a dream to be true or false, then a dream-poem might likewise evade these questions. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 74–75. And since Chaucer himself gleefully avoids definitively establishing the "cause" of Geffrey's dream in the introduction of the House of Fame, insisting instead on its wondrous nature, readers are left only with the sense that the dream, and the poem that narrates it, is "not true, not false, but wonderful." Spearing, 75. This lack of inherent resolvability to truth or falsity marks the dream, and the poem, as akin to the hybrids of the House of Rumor—inherently epistemologically mixed, and thus an endless potential source of wonder and of interpretative possibilities. Indeed, T. S. Miller reads Geffrey's instructions to the readers not to "misdeme" his dream/poem as permitting a wide range of interpretative approaches, provided they are undertaken in good faith. Miller, "Writing Dreams to Good," 541. Deanne Williams likewise reads the idea of a dream being "turned to good" as a stand-in for the process of dream-interpretation or dream-poem interpretation. As she puts it:

What does it mean to turn a dream to good? Dreams are subject to interpretation: they can be 'turned' for the better or for the worse. As a literary genre, the dream vision requires the

To read with wonder is to defer conclusions—to explore many texts and many angles without committing to a single, definitive answer.[116] It is to focus less on categorization and more on the thing itself, too remain open to a wide range of insights but to abandon the pretense of absolute control over the process. To allow oneself to wonder is to sit with uncertainty and make of uncertainty a virtue. These are the lessons Geffrey seems to have learned by the end of his journey. In the following section, we will look back to the beginning, to see how he got there.

Part 2: The *Aeneid*

Having made a case for the benefits of wonder, Geffrey now steps back in time, to showcase a reading experience where wonder is entirely absent. This reading experience takes place at the beginning of Geffrey's dream, when he finds himself in a temple of Venus. As he is exploring the temple, he sees a brass tablet on the wall, inscribed with a version of the *Aeneid*, and he begins to read. The narrative Chaucer's readers are presented with, however, is not Virgil's *Aeneid*. Although it follows the same general plot, the text in

---

reader to work alongside the author to extract meaning from the dream: a process that can be done well, 'to goode,' or poorly. Chaucer's *House of Fame* opens with a prayer (perhaps closer to an oath) for a good—an accurate or benevolent—interpretation that acknowledges the difficulty of finding any stable meaning in a text. Williams, "The Dream Visions," 147.

To turn a dream to good is thus to give it "the best possible interpretation among the many that exist." Williams, 159.

[116] On the idea that the *House of Fame* generally promotes interpretation without necessitating its conclusion, in part through rich and ambiguous signs that invite variable interpretations, see: Ellen E. Martin, "The Interior of His Mind: Exegesis in the *House of Fame*," in *The Rhetorical Poetics of the Middle Ages: Reconstructive Polyphony: Essays in Honor of Robert O. Payne*, ed. John M. Hill and Deborah Sinnreich-Levi (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 115–20, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106012468135. In particular, Martin sees the poem's "ornamentation" as a means of representing the unconscious desire for certainty while simultaneously avoiding a confrontation with the certainty that would "foreclose Chaucer's imaginative life": "In the parure of the poem, he and his reader can imagine truth and conviction without, however, ever thinking they have found them." Martin, 116.

Geffrey's dream is a composite one: a mix of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Heroides*, and a number

of other texts, reconstructed and heavily altered in the space of Geffrey's memory. [117] Far

from a faithful adaptation of the original works, this version of the text is a product of

Geffrey's prior reading experiences, a work, as we shall see, about which he has already

drawn a conclusion.[118] This remembered text, as I will argue, has essentially been pre-

empted of wonder—its meaning determined to the satisfaction of its reader, and the text

itself doctored to conform to this meaning. Any part of the work that does not fit with

Geffrey's prior interpretation has been altered or suppressed. And when Geffrey reveals the

results of his reading, two things become clear. The first is that becoming satisfied with a

single, controlling interpretation of a text can bring one's wonder to a halt. The second, is

that while a de-wondered text may represent a satisfactory endpoint to the learning

experience, it is also, necessarily, an *end*. And if this end is reached too soon, before the

---

[117] See Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 980n240-382. Geffrey's practice here is not an unusual one. As Marilynn Desmond notes, medieval vernacular adaptations of the *Aeneid* often focus heavily on the Aeneas-Dido story, and "frequently appear to conflate the Ovidian and the Virgilian Dido." Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, New Edition, Medieval Cultures 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 17, 46.

[118] Elizabeth Buckmaster characterizes the text similarly. As she argues:

> . . . in fact, it is not a summary of a single poem, although the dreamer certainly implies that it is. It is, rather, a memorial reconstruction of a highly individualized act of reading and conflating two books, the *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Heroides*, vii. The story that the dreamer remembers combines the two classical versions even though they are, or seem to be, irreconcilable. This reconciliation is, we must remember, an act of memory protected by the fiction of the dream . . . From his memory of two old books, the dreamer has created a 'new thing' an eccentric retelling that recognizes the validity of conflicting truths in fiction—'fals and soth compouned.'" Elizabeth Buckmaster, "Meditation and Memory in Chaucer's 'House of Fame,'" *Modern Language Studies* 16, no. 3 (1986): 284, https://doi.org/10.2307/3194908.

While I am less apt than Buckmaster to see Geffrey's rereading as a defense of the validity of "fals and soth compouned" (I believe Chaucer shows the virtues of this mix elsewhere), I agree with Buckmaster's contention that the "*Aeneid*" we get in the *House of Fame* is a product of Geffrey's memory and a portrait of his reading process.

reader has learned enough, then the result may be "knowledge" that is unsatisfactory and

hopelessly limited. The spectacle of Geffrey's wonderless reading can thus be understood

as an encouragement to readers both to be willing to experience wonder at the texts they

read and to consider carefully whether or not they are truly done learning from them.

The idea that Geffrey's *Aeneid* is a remembered and imagined text is apparent from

the framing device of the dream-vision, as well as Geffrey's own words. At the beginning of

Book 2, Geffrey directly addresses his mind, saying: "O Thought, that wrot al that I mette, /

And in the tresorye hyt shette / Of my brayn" (523-4). Geffrey's "thought," then, is the

author of both his dream and the text within it. Geffrey, of course, did not originate the plot

of the *Aeneid*. Nor did he invent the characters of Dido and Aeneas, or the tradition of Dido's

lament at Aeneas's departure. Geffrey confesses as much when he states that whoever

wishes to learn more about Dido should "Rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde"

(378-9). What he has done is combine remembered pieces of these sources with his own

interpretations of them, creating a new version in the space of his thoughts, which is then

stored in the treasury of his memory.[119] Indeed, in the middle of his retelling, Geffrey

---

[119] See Buckmaster, 284. On the idea of memory as a treasury in classical and medieval thought, see: Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 73–74, 85, 113, 204, 246. The idea that this is a remembered text, encountered in the space of a dream, may explain the oft-noted fact that the medium in which Geffrey encounters the story (engraved text, picture, oral narrative, direct experience) appears to shift as he "reads." For a thorough summary of these shifts, and scholarship on them, see: Cawsey, "Vernacular Transformation of the Latin Inheritance: Chaucer's *House of Fame*," 22–25. Cawsey associates the apparent changes in the medium of transmission with Geffrey's emotional immersion in the story, such that it appears more immediately present to him the more invested he is, and the more invested he is, the more he "rewrites" the narrative in the space of his mind. The scene thus constitutes "a dramatization of reader-response" that: "suggests that mental rewriting happens whenever the reader is emotionally engaged with a text. Especially when the reader is well-read, and makes connections to the other texts already in the store-house of his memory, this kind of re-writing is apt to occur." Cawsey, 24–25. I agree with Cawsey in seeing this passage as a dramatization of reader response, and linking it to the bookishness of its narrator. A reading of this scene as a straightforward account of a reader's response to a text, however, seems to me to be complicated by the fact that both text and response exist in Geffrey's mind. Thus, I would argue that

identifies a specific element of the text that he has originated himself: Dido's monologue when she laments the loss of Aeneas. He states: "In such wordes gan to pleyne / Dydo of hir grete peyne, / As me mette redely— / Non other auctor alegge I." (311-4). By his own admission, he has altered his source texts by adding his own original contributions.[120] And a number of the alterations he makes are linked with his interpretation of the work's meaning.

We are introduced to Geffrey's interpretation of the work beginning on line 265. Up until this point, his retelling is primarily a pared-down summary of the events of the tale, periodically interjected with expressions of pity and anger towards its characters. Once he reaches the meeting of Aeneas and Dido, however, his storytelling shifts. He states that they met, that Dido became Aeneas's lover, and that he has no interest in describing these matters further. What he *is* interested in doing is expressing his interpretation of the work. Thus, after relating how quickly and thoroughly Dido gave her love to Aeneas, he begins to moralize, exclaiming:

> Allas! what harm doth apparence,
> Whan hit is fals in existence!
> For he to hir a traytour was;
> Wherfore she slow hirself, allas!
> Loo, how a woman doth amys

---

he is not mentally re-writing the text in the moment so much as re-encountering and continuing to modify a text he has already mentally re-written.

[120] Even if the version of the text "graven" on the wall is understood to be a purely faithful or "authoritative" version of the *Aeneid*, it is clear that in narrating what he sees, Geffrey does not stick faithfully to this version of the text. Rather, as Jacqueline Miller observes, he makes changes to the "proportion and structure" of the work, expanding and contracting parts of the narrative "to fit his own purposes and impulses" as "His individual perspective and personality emerge to modify— even shape—the story he is retelling." Miller, "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," 109, 105–7. Furthermore, once he states that he alleges no other author than himself, he abandons for a time, as Miller notes, any pretense that he is faithfully relating what he saw on the wall, although he will return to it later. Miller, 108–10. The version of the story we get is thus shaped around Geffrey's interpretative practices.

To love hym that unknowen ys!
For, be Cryst, lo, thus yt fareth:
"Hyt is not al gold that glareth." (269-72)

Over the next twenty lines, Geffrey elaborates upon this message, advising against choosing

a lover based on outward appearance or friendly manner, for some men will feign kindness

and good intentions until they have gotten what they want. Hence, women should wait

until they know men better before giving them their love. These two messages: that false

appearances are harmful and that women should not be so quick to grant their love to men,

constitute the core of his interpretation of the poem.[121]

Having delivered these messages, Geffrey indicates that he will be returning to the

story, stating: "But let us speke of Eneas, / How he betrayed hir, allas, / And lefte hir ful

unkyndely." (293-5). The rest of his narration, however, is all but consumed by the message

---

[121] This kind of exemplary reading of the *Aeneid*, as well as analysis of the moral character and significance of Aeneas and Dido, was not at all uncommon. As Marilynn Desmond explains, "As a text of enormous cultural authority, Virgil's *Aeneid* engendered a multitude of other texts, particularly commentaries and allegorical adaptations in Latin" but also a variety of vernacular imitations and adaptations. Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, 17. Among these responses were texts that analyzed and moralized the work's principal characters. In his *Genealogia* 14, for example, Boccaccio treats Dido as a symbol of sexual temptation, and Aeneas's choice to leave her as an example of how the reader ought to resist such temptation. Desmond, 60–61. The allegorical interpretations of Fulgentius and Bernard Silvestris treat the *Aeneid* as an allegory of the male human life and cast Dido as a representation of the libido. Desmond, 83–91. Certain Christian interpretations of the *Aeneid* read Dido's affair with Aeneas as an allegory for the soul's entrapment by sin. Williams, "The Dream Visions," 158. The robust tradition of adaptation and commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid* also included a significant amount of debate regarding "the chastity of Dido and the virtue of Aeneas." Williams, 158; Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, 46. And while many sided against Dido, others, including Ovid, took her side, regarding her as a victim and "Aeneas as an example of the worst kind of male cowardice." Williams, "The Dream Visions," 158. Geffrey's moralization is thus not, in and of itself, an unacceptable or particularly unusual usage of his source texts. It has other issues, however, as I will discuss. For further discussion of medieval responses to, and interpretations and rewritings of, the characters of Aeneas and Dido, see: Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*; Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in medieval England: figuring the* Aeneid *from the twelfth century to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015045624783.

he has derived from the work. Dido repeats and expands upon it when she is berating

Aeneas. Geffrey restates it when he begins to tell tales of other treacherous men. And

looking over the narrative as a whole, it becomes clear that even before he mentions his

interpretation, Geffrey has shaped the text around this message, suppressing portions that

might not fit and expanding upon and altering portions that do.[122] The result is that his

interpretation and the *Aeneid* become, in essence, coextensive: there is nothing there that

cannot be explained by ot.[123] The "*Aeneid*" we see is one that is completely understood by

its reader: a text that can no longer evoke in him any wonder.

An example of the way that Geffrey shapes his sources to his own interpretation is

the way that he rewrites Dido's objections to Aeneas, directing them, like his moral,

towards men in general rather than Aeneas in particular. In both the *Aeneid* and the

Heroides, Dido regards Aeneas as treacherous for leaving her, and says so.[124] In the

---

[122] The exception to this tendency might be the fact that he does not, as Baswell observes, describe Aeneas's seduction and betrayal of Dido in any real detail, or the course of their love. Baswell, *Virgil in medieval England: figuring the* Aeneid *from the twelfth century to Chaucer*, 234. Even this serves his interpretation, however, as it allows Aeneas and Dido's actions to exist solely in terms of his (and Dido's) interpretations of them. Minimizing the actual courtship also allows him to minimize the supernatural invention that occurs during that courtship in the *Aeneid*, as I will discuss.

[123] As J. Allen Mitchell suggests, every act of moralization involves a necessary "reduction" of a text J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 17–20. What we see here is, in essence, a text that has been reverse-engineered on the basis of this moral in the mind of its reader. As a result, it appears pre-reduced, an appearance Christopher Baswell connects to the use of the *Aeneid* in pedagogical contexts, remarking that Geffrey's "sometimes comically simple-minded didacticism" evokes "the reductionist impact of some pedagogical glossating," which necessarily flattens the text, much as exemplary reduction does. Baswell, *Virgil in medieval England: figuring the* Aeneid *from the twelfth century to Chaucer*, 231.

[124] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 4.379, p. 138; Ovid, *Heroides*, in *Heroides. Amores*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Grant Showerman, Loeb Classical Library 41 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), VII, vv. 1–30, pp. 82–84, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL041/1914/volume.xml.

Heroides, in particular, Dido reflects on the fact that Aeneas abandoned his previous wife, Creusa, when fleeing Troy, and treats it as evidence of his faithlessness.[125] In Geffrey's adaptation of the tale, however, Dido focuses less on blaming Aeneas for his deception and more on treating Aeneas's deception as an example of the perfidy of men more generally. Thus, she cries: "Allas, is every man thus trewe, / That every yer wolde have a newe, / Yf hit so longe tyme dure?" (301-5). She goes on to outline the reasons men take multiple lovers, beg Aeneas for mercy, and then complain about how men are deceptive and women are too easily deceived. These general morals form a striking contrast with the very direct, targeted attacks that Dido makes on Aeneas's character and judgment in the *Heroides* and in the *Aeneid*. Even though she regards herself as betrayed in these works, she does not generalize from Aeneas's conduct to that of men as a group. Having Dido make the leap from Aeneas's betrayal to men's betrayal serves Geffrey's interpretation, however, and thus he makes it a prominent part of his adaptation.

So, too, does Geffrey's choice to downplay the role of divine intervention in the relationship of Aeneas and Dido serve his interpretation of the narrative as an exemplum of human infidelity and folly. Emulating the skepticism that the Dido of the *Heroides* shows towards the idea that Aeneas is led by the gods, Geffrey's version of the *Aeneid* persistently pushes to the background the idea that fate or divine intervention was responsible for Aeneas's choice to leave Dido or Dido's choice to become his lover.[126] In suppressing the

---

[125] Ovid, *Heroides* VII, vv. 81–85, p. 88.

[126] Indeed, this downplaying of the divine can in some ways be read as a product of Chaucer's decision to combine the *Aeneid* and the *Heroides*, since the Dido of the *Heroides* makes a brief ironic comment on Aeneas's claim that a god told him to leave her, remarking on how difficult and slow his journey is for somebody who is being led by a god. Ovid, *Heroides* VII, vv. 141–42, p. 94. As Marilynn Desmond comments: "In this passage she not only demystifies the relationship between

role of destiny in the story, he is able to cast Aeneas and Dido's relationship as a stronger example of his central argument that men's deceptiveness leads to tragedy, and that women should not be so gullible or so quick to give their love.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas's role as the divinely-appointed future founder of a nation is established early on and is a driving force throughout the narrative. Dido, likewise, is pushed to fall in love with Aeneas because Cupid, at Venus's request, uses his powers to influence her.[127] In addition, Aeneas's primary impetus to leave Dido is a dream in which Mercury appears to him and chastises him on Jupiter's behalf for ignoring his heroic destiny.[128] Geffrey, on the other hand, displays a marked tendency to reduce or downplay the role of the gods in Aeneas and Dido's love affair relative to the *Aeneid*, although he is willing to discuss their influence in other parts of the poem. This tendency can be seen in the way Geffrey suppresses Venus and Cupid's roles in making Dido fall in love with Aeneas. In the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas and Dido first meet, Venus is described as having "breathed her beauty on her son [Aeneas]," giving him the appearance of a god.[129] Later, Venus instructs Cupid to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas, telling him to take on the likeness of Aeneas's son in order to get close to the queen, so that when she "cradles you in her lap, / caressing, kissing you gently, you can breathe / your secret fire into her, poison

---

mortals and the divine, she likewise attempts to demythologize the sense of destiny and fate that the Aeneid so problematically represents." Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, 42. Geffrey's choice to emulate the Dido of the *Heroides*'s skepticism about the role of the gods in Aeneas's journey demonstrates his tendency to select details that reinforce his interpretation, as well as indicating a likely source of this interpretation.

[127] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.803-863, pp. 70–71.

[128] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.330-49, pp. 136–137.

[129] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.704-5, p. 67.

the queen / and she will never know."[130] When Cupid enters Dido's presence in this

disguise, "tragic Dido, doomed to a plague / about to strike, cannot feast her eyes enough, /

thrilled both by the boy and the gifts he brings / and the more she looks the more the fire

grows."[131] Once Dido embraces Cupid, the narrative relates that "a mighty god is sinking

into her, to her grief," and once he has Dido in his power, Cupid "blots out the memory of

[Dido's former husband] Sychaeus bit by bit, / trying to seize with a fresh, living love / a

heart at rest for long—long numb to passion."[132] By virtue of this introduction, it is difficult

to see Dido's passion, and her eventual yielding to Aeneas, as entirely the product of her

own choice or of Aeneas's deception or seduction. Venus wishes for Cupid to fill Dido with

the fire of love—and when she finds herself "nursing the wound with her lifeblood, /

consumed by the fire buried in her heart," the influence of the gods is clear in her affliction.

She chooses to become Eneas's lover, but the fury of her passion is not her choice at all.[133]

Geffrey, in contrast, rushes past Venus's role in making Dido fall in love. He

mentions, briefly, that:

> . . . shortly of this thyng to pace,
> he made Eneas so in grace
> Of Dido, quene of that contree,
> That shortly for to tellen, she
> Becam his love and let him doo
> Al that weddynge longeth too. (239-44)

---

[130] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.818-21, p. 70.

[131] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.850-3, p. 71.

[132] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.859-63, p. 71.

[133] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.2-3, p. 125. One might also note that the storm that leads Dido to shelter in a cave with Aeneas and to "doo / Al that weddynge longeth too" is, in the *Aeneid*, part of a deliberate ruse by Juno to push the pair into marriage and foil Venus's plans (243-4). Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.146-56, p. 131.

Venus puts Aeneas in Dido's good graces, and therefore Dido becomes his love and "lets"

him act as her husband. There is no frenzy of passion, no poisoning of Dido's body with

tormenting flame. The emphasis, instead, is on Dido's voluntary concession and its

consequences.

Geffrey similarly downplays destiny and emphasizes agency when describing Dido's

motives for becoming Aeneas's beloved. As he states:

> Ther sawgh I grave how Eneas
> Tolde Dido every caas
> That hym was tyd upon the see.
>   And after grave was how shee
> Made of hym shortly at oo word
> Hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord,
> And dide hym al the reverence
> And leyde on hym al the dispence
> That any woman myghte do,
> Wenynge hyt had al be so
> As he hir swor; and herby demed
> That he was good, for he such semed. (253-64)

Dido's passion is not the result of Venus's influence but of Eneas's *words*—Dido made of

him *at one word*, her love. His manipulative storytelling, not his goddess mother, is the

force that inspires Dido to love him. In addition, the passage strongly emphasizes Dido's

agency in choosing Aeneas: she "made of hym" her love, she "dide hym" reverence, and she

"leyde on hym" her money, because she "demed / That he was good." Her error is an error

of judgment, her love a reasoned response to Aeneas's words and appearance, and the

consequences of this love the result of the result of her own deliberate action. The only

force that approximates destiny in this passage is women's tendency to believe what they

are told. After all, Dido is simply doing what "any woman myghte do" (261).

Similarly, when Geffrey discusses the possibility that Aeneas may have had

supernatural motives for leaving Dido, the concession is oddly placed and ambivalently

presented. In the *Aeneid*, after Aeneas and Dido have become lovers, Mercury appears to

Aeneas and criticizes him for remaining with Dido and ignoring his destiny as the founder

of an empire.[134] Only once he has been reminded of his duty does Aeneas desire to leave

Dido.[135] Geffrey, however, first relates that Aeneas and Dido became lovers, then refers to

Aeneas as a traitor who caused Dido's death, then moralizes about the perfidy of men, and

then relays in great detail Dido's heartbroken response to learning that Aeneas is going to

leave her (242-360). After this, he briefly describes her suicide, gives a list of other

legendary men who betrayed their wives and lovers (372-426), and only then, over one

hundred fifty lines after first calling Aeneas a traitor, does he state:

> But to excusen Eneas
> Fullyche of al his grete trespas,
> The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,
> Bad hym goo into Itayle,
> And leve Auffrike's regioun,
> And Dido and hir faire toun. (427-432)

At this point, so thoroughly has Geffrey presented Aeneas as a heartless scoundrel, that this

concession reads like an "excuse," rather than a motive, for Aeneas's behavior.[136] Indeed, as

Wolfgang Clemen notes: "when it comes to the most significant point here, the behests of

that fateful power which Aeneas was bound to obey before even his love, Chaucer only

mentions these in a casual aside thrown out long after he had finished with the whole

---

[134] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.330-345, pp. 136-37.

[135] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.345-351, p.137.

[136] As Delany remarks: "this passage seems unconvincing after Dido's hyperbolic complaint. It is further weakened because it follows the event whose motivation it is supposed to supply, and because the Narrator relies on 'the book' instead of providing direct personal comment." Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 54. For a contrasting reading—that this "excuse" inevitably calls the previous exemplary interpretation into question, even though it does not completely overturn it, see: McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity*, 62–63.

episode."[137] Even if Chaucer's readers are meant to understand that Mercury really *did* appear to Aeneas, this is a fact that the book gives to "excuse" Aeneas for his "grete trespas." It does nothing to counter the idea that Aeneas did, in fact, trespass against Dido. Nor does it indicate whether or not this excuse is successful: Geffrey does not seem convinced. Indeed, while references to one's source tend to confer authority in medieval narratives, what the "book seyth" is decidedly not the same as what Geffrey has been saying. The "book seith" that Mercury appears to Aeneas "sauns fayle." Without fail, the *Aeneid* does say this. Geffrey, however, seems to have failed to put this episode in his own narrative, relegating it instead to a side-note. It is something he remembers reading in Virgil's "book," but it does not seem to be something he actually "saugh" on the wall in his dream. Instead of the source lending credence to Geffrey's narrative, his narrative seems to be casting doubt on the relevance of his source's account to his own reading experience. Because Mercury's intervention is suppressed, the operation of destiny and the divine in Aeneas and Dido's relationship is sidelined, in favor of an interpretation that sees Dido and Aeneas's choices as products of broader human failings.

In downplaying the divine in this way, Geffrey thus heavily shapes the narrative in line with his own interpretation. Dido made a bad choice, but this is because she is like all women. Destiny did not make her do it: her own haste in giving her love is to blame. But how can anyone wonder at this? Aeneas lied to her, much as men always lie to women to get what they want. The more the divine fades into the background, the more the characters' choices are emphasized, the less the story looks like the *Aeneid* and the more it looks like an exemplum of Geffrey's predetermined moral.

---

[137] Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 83.

The result of Geffrey's interventions is a text that has, in essence, been de-wondered. Everything that might challenge Geffrey's interpretation has been downplayed or excised. Everything that is strange, paradoxical, or irrelevant to his focus is ignored or hurried past. By combining his memories of two texts with his interpretations of them, he has produced a work that *is* its message. And in understanding this message, he can understand the whole. Without anything left in the text to challenge his understanding, there is nothing left to evoke his wonder.

As a creative adaptation of the *Aeneid*, there is noting inherently wrong with Geffrey's version. An author is free to cut, embellish, and recombine when producing a new take on an old tale. Certainly Ovid did so when writing Dido's epistle in the *Heroides*.[138] And Chaucer rewrites with relish throughout his body of work. Indeed, in its broad details, Geffrey's approach to his sources is not particularly aberrant. The version of the *Aeneid* that exists in his mind, partial and biased as it is, is the product of a natural process of interpretation and memory. Unless one possesses a perfect memory, after all, most texts are remembered piecemeal, and the reader's invention is tasked with constructing a coherent document from these pieces.[139] Indeed, medieval technologies of memorization

---

[138] See Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, 33–45.

[139] Indeed, Nickolas Haydock views the mental modification of texts, as a result of an imperfect memory, to be one of the key themes of the work. As he argues:

> Chaucer's poem dramatizes what happens to books when they enter a mind already cluttered with other books: some of them memorized verbatim, some barely and imperfectly recollected, some hopelessly muddled, and others (like the infamous 'Lollius') present only by reputation. When a book enters the messy, cramped space of a brain full of other books it is accommodated to what is already there, just as these books have to give up space—or share it—with the new arrival. Chaucer's poem is a comedy about the cluttered space of readerly intellection, a carnival celebration of the imagination ruminating on memories of books. Through this menacing funhouse of folly and delight we venture forth into the uncertain future of a mind making itself up as it goes along. Books truncate and

emphasize the necessity of memorizing a text in pieces, a practice termed *divisio*.[140] Once

the text is divided, its fragments are arranged in the memory via various menmonic devices

in a process of mental *compositio* or *collatio* which should, ideally, allow the reader to recall

the order of the text as a whole.[141] Through the process of memorization, however, the text

is necessarily changed—shaped and personalized to the reader by the affective experience

of reading and reflection.[142] If the reader has come up with a particularly strong

interpretation, then the pieces may very well shape themselves around this interpretation,

with the interpretation influencing the remembered text and the text solidifying one's

interpretation in one's memory.[143] In this sense, what we see in Geffrey's dream of the

Aeneid may be simply the end-result of this process of interpretation: a text that has been

mentally reconstituted into a very different beast. All texts may look this way in the mind of

a reader who has come to satisfying conclusions about them.

Something, however, has been lost in the process. By deciding on a single,

controlling interpretation and pushing aside any strange, paradoxical, or contradictory

---

supplement each other in the dreamer's vision. Nickolas Haydock, "False and Sooth
Compounded in Caxton's Ending of Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Atenea* 26, no. 2 (2006): 117–
18, Gale Literature Resource Center.

[140] Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 174.

[141] Carruthers, 85, 174.

[142] Carruthers, 164–65, 168–69.

[143] On Chaucer's awareness of the power of past readings to shape both one's new readings and
one's approach to new experiences, see: Jill Mann, "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer," in
Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 3–8;
Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 17–19.

elements, Geffrey has created a mental text that, at least for him, holds no more wonder.[144]

He feels strongly about this text, expressing pity and anger towards its characters.[145] But he

has no uncertainty about what it may mean.[146] I do not believe it is an accident that in this

episode alone out of all of the episodes in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer does not use the

word "wonder" in any form. In the introduction, Geffrey wonders at what causes dreams.

He wonders when he sees the Eagle, and the Eagle mentions wonder while he is guiding

him. Geffrey sees wonders in the House of Fame and is eager to learn from the wonders in

the House of Rumor. He even expresses that before his dream, he fell asleep "wonder

soone."[147] It is only here, reading a text that he seems to completely understand, that there

is almost no wonder whatsoever.[148]

---

[144] As Mitchell puts it, there is a kind of inevitable tragedy to exemplary interpretation, specifically to deciding on an ethical use for a text, because this decision must necessarily be reductive and foreclose other interpretative possibilities. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 131.

[145] For an excellent analysis of the role of emotion and empathy in Geffrey's reading of the *Aeneid*, see: Thomas Hahn, "Don't Cry for Me, Augustinius: Dido and the Dangers of Empathy," in *Truth and Tales: Cultural Mobility and Medieval Media* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 41–59.

[146] Even certain inconsistencies in his narrative, such as his awkward shift from the sympathetic, epic Aeneas of the opening of his tale to the sinister, manipulative Aeneas of the Dido episode may also serve Geffrey's moral: in this case, the idea that men may appear good but truly be bad. For a contrasting reading of this disjunction as a sign of the episode's more ambivalent perspective on Aeneas, and as Chaucer's acknowledgement of the competing truths of both the *Aeneid* and the *Heroides*, see: Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 50–57.

[147] A throwaway use of "wonder" as an intensifier, perhaps, but Chaucer does not even use the word in this capacity while he is in the Temple of Venus: the word "wonder" does not appear there at all.

[148] He does use a word evokes the wondrous, "mervelous," in this section, when he is briefly summarizing the rest of the *Aeneid* following the Dido episode. Here he mentions how he saw: "alle the mervelous signals / Of the goddys celestials." (459-460). The reader is not shown these marvelous signals, however, and if they once inspired wonder in Geffrey, they do not seem to affect him much now. Rather, they are pushed aside and minimized, like other potentially wondrous aspects of the narrative. When Geoffrey speaks of marvels instead of wonders in this poem, the emphasis seems much less strong.

He does not *have* to remember it this way. He might choose to focus instead on

moments of strangeness or puzzlement: to contemplate the wondrous details that will,

later in his dream, stick so strongly in his mind. It is not that the *Aeneid* itself is inherently

stale or devoid of wondrous new tidings. It is just that, in favor of his prior interpretation,

Geffrey refuses to see them. Indeed, by turning the work into a kind of moral exemplum,

Geffrey has produced the sense that he comprehends the work at the expense of his

wonder at it. Drawing from the work of John of Salisbury, Bynum argues that among

authors of the Middle Ages, particularly among authors of entertainment literature,[149]

"Amazement is suppressed by the citing of too many cases, the formulation of general laws,

the *inductio exemplorum*. Wonder is at the singular—both its significance and its

particularity."[150] As an example, she cites John of Salisbury's treatment of wonder in his

Policraticus, stating that he "sees wonder as a response to 'majesty,' to 'hidden wisdom' or

significance, and contrasts the activity of generalizing or moralizing (*inductio*

exemplorum—that is, the citing of instructive general cases) with the emotion or

experience of wonder."[151]

In Geffrey's source texts, Dido and Aeneas are singular. Aeneas is a hero of destiny,

founder of an empire. Dido is the legendary queen of Carthage, doomed by the gods to love

and to suffer for loving. In Geffrey's version, however, Aeneas is a symbol of all men's

---

[149] Bynum, "Wonder," 7. In Bynum's terms, the "literature of entertainment" includes "history writing, travel accounts, and story collections" Bynum, 12.

[150] Bynum, "Wonder," 24.

[151] Bynum, 13–14.

perfidy, Dido of all women's gullibility.[152] They are the "instructive general cases" with

which Geffrey supports his interpretation.[153] Neither singular nor paradoxical,

exemplifying one lesson and one lesson alone, they are not objects of wonder, but objects of

moral instruction.[154] And because Geffrey has satisfied himself with this one lesson, he no

longer wonders at their story. It has nothing more to teach him.

The idea that he no longer wonders at the narrative can be seen, too, in his response

when he leaves the temple. Stepping outside, he comments on the "noblesse" of the images

in the temple, and the "richesse" he saw graven there (471-72). But the only questions he

has are about who made the images and where he is. The story itself, subject to a single

controlling interpretation, invites no curiosity.

Geffrey's reading experience in the Temple of Venus thus demonstrates both what

happens when a reader ceases to wonder about a text and what may result from this

---

[152] While I read Geffrey's versions of Aeneas and Dido as deprived of ambiguity, other scholars have
seen a certain degree of ambivalence in Chaucer's portrayal of these characters during this episode.
John McGavin, for example, argues that by providing competing interpretations of Aeneas's
character and showing how the reputations created by Fame can be inaccurate, Chaucer calls into
question the idea that Aeneas and Dido really ought to be uncritically treated as exemplary.
McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity*, 62–63. See also: Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 50–57.
While I agree that Chaucer's modified narrative of the tale of Aeneas and Dido vividly points out to
the reader the shortcomings of Geffrey's exemplary treatment of the work, I read Geffrey the
character as less willing to delve into these ambiguities.

[153] It was not uncommon for medieval readers to the *Aeneid* and its characters as exemplary in this
way. For a discussion of this tendency, see: Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the
Medieval Aeneid*, 50–51, 62–66, 68, 184, 168. Singular narratives can be *made* useful in this way. But
only, perhaps, at the cost of some of the wonder they might otherwise inspire in the teller or the
reader.

[154] Of course, as Elizabeth Allen notes, any time one frames a narrative as exemplary, one creates a
potential tension between the affectively engaging details of the narrative and the idea of a
determinate moral meaning or an instrumentalized text. Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and
Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–18.
But regardless of how successful they are likely to be for others, I see Geffrey's efforts here as the
product of a desire to reduce and limit the text for himself—and Chaucer's efforts as calling
attention to this interpretative reduction.

cessation of wonder. During his previous reading of the *Aeneid* and the *Heroides*, Geffrey

devised a moral that, to his mind, sufficiently explained the entire *Aeneid*. Treating this

moral as the key to the text as a whole, he ceased to wonder further about the work. The

result is that when he remembers the work, what he sees in his mind is a de-wondered text,

a text completely known. A kind of successful reading, perhaps. Indeed, there is nothing

inherently wrong with using wonder as an impetus to learn, gathering information, and,

having done one's due diligence, ceasing to wonder about the object. The drive to know

that accompanies the experience of wonder is, after all, one of the reasons it conduces so

well to learning. And if investigation of the object of wonder ultimately allows one to

integrate it back into one's familiar categories or paradigms, then so much the better; in

such cases, one can clearly say that some kind of learning has taken place.[155]

---

[155] As Van Dussen argues, even when wondrous "things" cannot be definitively resolved into familiar categories, Chaucer looks positively on the process of striving for this kind of resolution. As he argues:

> In Chaucer, we do not always find the logic or causal chain; disruptive objects may remain utterly particular to their perceivers, unavailable for classification or integration back into the relationship between human experience and the natural order. Even so, the attempt to integrate is significant, even necessary, and the idea is that those things that are not yet integrated may yet be so. On the other hand, an inability to integrate surprising things that one does not yet understand opens up the possibility of an atomized, disintegrated world. The move to integration, although starting with what is perceived as disconcertingly particular and unaccountable (a mechanical steed, a wondrous ring) in fact usually moves from the particular to classification, system, and relationship in Chaucer. His interest in the particular is therefore not an interest in the concrete or physical in its own right, but in the possible integration of the physical within a discernible natural order. Van Dussen, "Things," 479.

While I would not argue that Chaucer necessarily prioritizes the integration and systematization of objects over wonder itself, I do agree with the trajectory that Van Dussen sketches here, whereby Chaucer's engagements with "things" tends to move "from the super- (beyond) natural to the particular, and then the integration of the particular within human knowledge of the natural order." Van Dussen, 479. Indeed, I argue that Chaucer dramatizes the process by which wondrous things are rationalized, and some of its potential benefits for the learner, in his description of the interactions between Geffrey and the Eagle.

What this episode vividly displays, however, is how the conviction of complete understanding of a text brings one's experience of wonder to a halt. Whether Geffrey has done his due diligence or stopped too soon, by ceasing to wonder about the text, he has dramatically limited his ability to learn anything new from it. And this limitation has implications for real-world readers, who must likewise decide whether or not they will open themselves to the experience of wonder, how long they will endeavor to prolong this experience, and what kinds of knowledge will ultimately satisfy them. Stepping out of the temple, having learned nothing new from his reading, Geffrey finds himself, fittingly, in a vast desert: a space whose emptiness fills him with terror. And it is in this desert of the mind that he encounters the Eagle, who will carry with him a different perspective on wonder.

Part 3: The Eagle

The Eagle who picks Geffrey up and serves as his guide is ambivalent towards the value of wonder for the learner, although he perceives its value for the teacher. Wonder, for this avian pedagogue, is useful because he can use it to locate gaps in Geffrey's knowledge. Once the Eagle identifies these gaps, he can fill them with the understanding Geffrey lacks. In his eagerness to instruct, however, he tends to both devalue wonder and to interfere with Geffrey's ability to engage in the act of wondering. Despite these downsides, the Eagle's didactic efforts have a net positive. For in traveling with him throughout the heavens, Geffrey begins to understand that both wonder and knowledge have value for the reader and the learner. And by the end of this leg of his journey, he is qualified to redress the errors he made in rejecting the wondrous while interpreting the *Aeneid*.

406

The idea that wonder, for the Eagle, indicates a lack of knowledge or proper understanding can be seen shortly after he enters the narrative. As mentioned above, Geffrey is filled with wonder upon seeing the Eagle—wonder that is quickly replaced with fear when the Eagle snatches him up in its talons. After the Eagle calms him down a bit by speaking to him, Geffrey begins to "wondren" in his mind about what is going to happen to him and to anxiously compare himself to Biblical and Classical figures who were likewise carried up to the heavens (582-93). Immediately following this bout of wondering, Geffrey relates:

> But he that bar me gan espye
> That I so thoughte, and seyde this:
> "Thow demest of thyself amys,
> For Joves ys not theraboute—
> I dar wel putte the out of doute—
> To make of the as yet a sterre ;
> But er I bere the moche ferre,
> I wol the telle what I am,
> And whider thou shalt, and why I cam
> To do thys, so that thou take
> Good herte, and not for fere quake." (594-604).

The Eagle, reading Geffrey's mind, perceives that Geffrey "demest . . . amys" in his wondering. Eager to correct this misjudgment, he puts Geffrey "out of doute" about Jove's motives and promises to tell him exactly who he is, why he is here, and where they are going. In his discourse to Geffrey, the Eagle thus prescribes *knowledge* as a treatment for fear. Once Geffrey knows about the Eagle and his mission, he will no longer "for fere quake." In this sense, Geffrey's fear is diagnostic: it indicates a gap in his knowledge, as well as the treatment that the Eagle must apply to cure it. The same, interestingly enough, appears to be true of wonder. After all, it is by observing Geffrey's thoughts while he is *wondering* that the Eagle is able to diagnose him with "misdeeming" the situation. Geffrey

does not have the information he needs to make a correct judgment about what is happening, and so he must be given this information if he is to deem aright. Knowledge is the treatment for fear, but it is also the treatment for the "doute" that can produce wonder.

The idea that the Eagle means to treat both Geffrey's fear and his wonder can be seen in his subsequent words to Geffrey. After promising to explain things, the Eagle introduces himself as: "I, that in my fet have the, / Of which thou hast a fere and wonder." (606-7). Having just stated that he is going to provide an explanation to remove Geffrey's fear, he proceeds to couch the following explanation as a response to both Geffrey's fear *and* his wonder. The implication is that, through explanation, the Eagle means to take away both. Understanding, after all, can quell wonder, and throughout their journey, the Eagle is eager to make sure Geffrey understands what he sees. This does not mean that the Eagle is necessarily hostile to wonder: after all, he goes on to promise Geffrey that he will show him "wonder thynges" (674). But the value of wonder for the Eagle, much like the value of fear, is primarily diagnostic. If Geffrey considers the things the Eagle shows him to be wondrous, then this means that these are things he needs to learn more about, tidings that will "quyte" him for the fruitless labor of study that has robbed him of "newe thynges." (670, 654). Once he has gained the requisite knowledge, he will no longer need to wonder.

The Eagle's use of wonder as a diagnostic measure is visible when he drops Geffrey off at the House of Fame. Before he takes his leave, the Eagle "warns" Geffrey about a thing "Of the whiche thou wolt have wonder." (1068-69). The "thing" in question is the way that words in the House of Fame take on the shapes of their speakers. The Eagle seems confident that Geffrey will find this phenomenon wondrous. Nonetheless, once he has explained the phenomenon, he checks with Geffrey to make sure, asking him: "ys this not a

wonder thyng?" (1083). When Geffrey replies in the affirmative, the Eagle immediately tells

him goodbye. As Geffrey relates: "with this word, 'Farewel,' quod he, / 'And here I wol

abyden the; / And God of heven sende the grace / Som good to lernen in this place." (1085-

98). Having confirmed that Geffrey finds an aspect of the House of Fame wondrous, the

Eagle is persuaded that Geffrey has the potential "to lernen" some good in that place.

Wonder, then, is a practical diagnostic tool for the didactically minded bird. When

Geffrey experiences wonder, it is useful to the Eagle, because the Eagle wants to teach, and

when Geffrey wonders, the Eagle recognizes what he has to learn. The problem is that, at

least initially, once the Eagle has determined what Geffrey has to learn, he is no longer

interested in allowing Geffrey to continue wondering or exploring topics on his own. The

pupil's wonder gives information to the teacher, and then the teacher must swiftly replace

it with the information the student lacks. Fear, wonder, and Geffrey's open confession of his

ignorance are equivalent in the eyes of the Eagle. They point to gaps in Geffrey's knowledge

and understanding, and then they cease to be important.

Thus, the Eagle treats Geffrey's wonder in much the same way as he treats his doubt

or his ignorance. As mentioned above, when the Eagle perceives that Geffrey is

experiencing fear and wonder, he begins to explain matters to him in great detail, helping

Geffrey to understand these things with reference to Geffrey's personal experience (his

reading habits and social isolation), the citation of authority (Jupiter sent the Eagle), and

reference to structures of meaning and causality (divine intervention, classical deities,

recompense for faithful labor) that Geffrey has encountered in his reading (606-699). And

when Geffrey explicitly tells the Eagle that there is something that he does not understand,

the Eagle's response to his ignorance reads like an extended version of his response to

Geffrey's wonder.

These similarities can be seen in the Eagle's response to Geffrey's ignorance of how sound may travel to the House of Fame. After listing the many kinds of tidings that Geffrey may find in the House of Fame, the Eagle checks in with his pupil, asking if he has a hard time believing these things. Geffrey admits that he does have difficulty believing it, for:

> . . . hyt
> were impossible, to my wit,
> Though that Fame had alle the pies
> In al a realme, and alle the spies,
> How that yet she shulde here al this,
> Or they espie hyt" (701-6).

Geffrey does not understand how what the Eagle says can be possible, and hence he does not give credence to the Eagle's promise. In order to persuade him, then, the Eagle needs to simultaneously build his own credibility as a teacher and fill in the gaps in Geffrey's knowledge that are producing his lack of understanding. Hence, the Eagle takes steps to ensure that Geffrey both understands the physics behind the House of Fame and believes his account of its contents, assuring him: "that kan I preve / Be reson worthy for to leve" (706-8).

In order to do so most effectively, the Eagle makes reference to Geffrey's reading, his past experience, and scientific and philosophical authorities on the subject.[156] In order to

---

[156] The Eagle's sources are varied. Martin Irvine locates key sources of the Eagle's discussion of the physics of sound in grammatical treatises such as Donatus's *Ars maior* and Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*, which define sound as "struck air." Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory," 852–55. Other sources for this discussion include Boethius's *De musica* and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum naturale*, from which Chaucer derives both information on the physics of sound and the analogy the Eagle draws between the behavior of sound and ripples on water. Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 983n765-81, 983n788-821. The idea of objects moving according to their natural inclination or "kyndely enclyning" (734) can be traced to Aristotle 's *Physics* and was mentioned by Augustine in his *Confessions*, Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, and Jean de Meun in the *Romance of the Rose*. Fyler, 983n734. Thomas R. Schneider also notes

bring what he is describing into the realm of his pupil's experience, he describes the

location of the House of Fame with reference to Ovid, telling Geffrey: "so thyn oune bok hyt

tellith" (712). When explaining how sound naturally seeks the House of Fame, he appeals

even more directly to Geffrey's sensory experience,[157] telling him: "Geffrey, thou wost ryght

wel this," and inviting him to personally verify what he is saying through experimentation:

> . . . loo thou maist alday se
> That any thing that hevy be,
> As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte,
> And bere hyt never so hye on highte,
> Lat goo thyn hand, hit falleth doun. (729, 737-741).

When describing how sound travels in ripples, he adopts a similar strategy, making an

analogy to Geffrey's past observations of the behavior of water:

> I preve hyt thus—take hede now—
> Be experience; for yf that thow
> Throwe on water now a stoon,
> Wel wost thou hyt wol make anoon

---

parallels between the Eagle's language and William of Ockham's discussion of projectile motion. Thomas R. Schneider, "Chaucer's Physics: Motion in *The House of Fame*," in *The Passenger: Medieval Texts and Transits*, ed. James L. Smith (Punctum Books, 2017), 116–17, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66798. As Delany puts it: "Scientific theory . . . and the empirical illustration of that theory form the body of the Eagle's monologue." Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 71. That being said, there is, as others have noted, a strong "pseudoscientific" quality to the Eagle's account, by virtue of the logically tenuous links he draws between accepted scientific concepts, as well as the fantastical phenomena he is using them to explain. See, for example: Williams, "The Dream Visions," 160; Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 74–75; Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 98; Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer*, 109–10. Despite the Eagle's questionable pedagogical bona fides, one can see, as I will argue, that Geffrey *does* derive some benefit from the Eagle's mix of the authoritative and empirical. And by abandoning the Eagle's preoccupation with certainty, Geffrey is able to convert the Eagle's approach into a workable, though not infallible, method for learning.

[157] Indeed, the Eagle not only appeals to Geffrey's experience, he also, as John Leyerle argues, supplements it; "he gives the poet forced experience of the natural world by acting out the theory he describes. His flight actualizes his theory of sound, a parallel to the way the Eagle himself actualizes a metaphor; the Eagle carrying Chaucer is a moving, ascending sound wave and the flight itself is an instance of what every sound does as it rises upwards to Fame. Again a concept is embodied in an image." John Leyerle, "Chaucer's Windy Eagle," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 256, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015059412067.

A litel roundell as a sercle . . .
And ryght anoon thow shalt see wel
That whel wol cause another whel (787-94).

The Eagle mixes these personal appeals with theories of sound that would have been current at the time of Chaucer's writing, so that Geffrey may not only learn, but learn information that is reliable.[158]

Indeed, although the Eagle's appeals to Geffrey's reading and experience function as rhetorical strategies to persuade him that the Eagle is correct, they also function as genuine scientific lessons, as well as strategies for acquiring and testing knowledge. The Eagle does not ask Geffrey to take what he says on faith—rather, he shows how Geffrey may come to understand—and thus to believe—that what he is saying is true. And what the Eagle models for Geffrey is a kind of knowledge-gathering and conviction-cultivating practice, whereby one diagnoses a gap in one's knowledge (possibly via wonder or fear), considers one's experience, listens to authoritative teachers, does one's reading, empirically verifies what one has read about, and then becomes persuaded that one now understands what one previously was uncertain about. If Geffrey follows the Eagle's steps, with the Eagle's guidance, then he will be able, ideally, to replace his wondering uncertainty, or any kind of ignorance, with the conviction of certain knowledge. And it is Geffrey's *certainty* that the Eagle wants. He will only be satisfied when Geffrey both assents to his description of how the universe works and has a substantial reason for this assent. Anything short of this is insufficient. Thus, when he asks Geffrey if he has been persuaded, and Geffrey replies: "A good persuasion . . . hyt is, and lyk to be / Ryght so as thou hast preved me" {872-74), the Eagle responds by saying:

---

[158] See note 156 above.

> Be God . . . and as I leve,
> Thou shalt have yet, or hit be eve,
> Of every word of thys sentence
> A preve by experience,
> And with thyn eres heren wel,
> Top and tayl and everydel,
> That every word that spoken ys
> Cometh into Fames Hous, ywys,
> As I have seyd; what wilt thou more? (875-83)

Geffrey's belief that the Eagle is probably right, that the truth is "lyk to be" as the Eagle has said, is not enough. Geffrey must be certain, and the Eagle will give him the proof that will allow him to attain this certain knowledge. This is the end-goal of the Eagle's pedagogical strategy. Wonder, which feeds on uncertainty, has little role in this process.

Thus it is that while explaining things, the Eagle tends to dismiss Geffrey's wonder. When the Eagle is explaining the behavior of ripples, for example, he tells Geffrey that they act the way they do "Although thou mowe hyt not ysee . . . Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder." (804-6). The Eagle suspects that Geffrey experiences wonder because he cannot see the way ripples move underwater, but presents this wonder as ultimately irrelevant. Ripples behave the same way regardless of whether or not Geffrey has observed them. They expand underwater "although" he cannot see them and "although" he wonders at them. How he feels about their behavior does not matter: as long as he understands how they work and believes the Eagle's explanation, this is sufficient for the Eagle.

The Eagle is also dismissive of wonder when he asks Geffrey to look down and see if he recognizes any of the sights below him. At first, Geffrey can see the details of animals, human dwellings, and various geographical features. After a while, however, they rise so high that the entire world seems miniscule. The Eagle asks him if he sees anything he knows, and Geffrey replies in the negative. This would seem to be an experience calculated

413

to produce wonder in Geffrey. But upon learning, predictably, that Geffrey can recognize

nothing beneath them, the Eagle states:

> No wonder nys . . . for half so high as this
> Nas Alexander Macedo;
> ne the kyng, Daun Scipio,
> That saw in drem, at point devys,
> helle and erthe and paradys" (913-18).

The fact that Geffrey has flown higher than these illustrious figures could be construed as a

matter for wonder, since it goes beyond his experience. After all, a number of the things he

considers wondrous are those that nobody, in his estimation, has ever seen before. The

Eagle, however, explicitly tells him not to wonder at the fact that he cannot see the earth

beneath them. Furthermore, he cites the names of these individuals less to impress Geffrey

and more to make a practical point: *they* could see the earth from where they were, but *you*

are higher up than them, so of course everything seems distant. The conclusion is

presented as obvious. Once again, the Eagle presents wonder as a sign of improper

contextualization or incomplete understanding, to be quickly remedied.

It must be said that the Eagle's approach to wonder is not necessarily a problem. If

wonder points out what one has yet to learn and inspires one to learn more, then why not

work to fulfill this desire by acquiring knowledge? Certainly, there is the risk that one may

gain incomplete understanding if one rushes the process. But the Eagle is so thorough in his

explanations of natural phenomena that Geffrey must surely be learning a great deal from

him. Nor does Geffrey object, initially, to this method of information-delivery. As he relates,

"He gan alway upper to sore, / And gladded me ay more and more, / So feythfully to me

spak he" (961-3). Geffrey is pleased with how thorough and convincing the Eagle's

explanations are. After all, this is what he prayed for when he found himself in the desert:

protection from phantoms and illusions. With the Eagle's knowledge and authority to clarify everything, how could he be misled or deluded?[159]

Following Geffrey's declaration of gladness, however, there is a lull in the Eagle's explanation. And during this time, Geffrey has some space to think. What he discovers as a result of this thought leads him to call a halt to the Eagle's lessons and claim some intellectual agency for himself. For when he is given a chance to assemble ideas on his own, he is able to recognize both the benefit of the Eagle's methods and the value of the wonder that the Eagle dismisses.

This shift in Geffrey's perspective occurs because the pause in the Eagle's discourse allows Geffrey to wonder. It should be noted that the word "wonder" is not used here to describe Geffrey's process of thinking. There is another word, however, that links this episode with Geffrey's previous period of silent thought, when he explicitly says he "Gan for to wondren" in his mind (583). This word is "fantasye." Earlier, when Geffrey recovers from his swoon in the Eagle's talons, he begins "to wondren," and when he has finished describing his thoughts, he states: "Loo, this was thoo my fantasye." (593). Similarly, when Geffrey is thinking to himself during the break in the Eagle's speech, the Eagle interrupts him by crying: "Lat be . . . thy fantasye!" (992). Looking into Geffrey's mind, the Eagle sees a

---

[159] I say this not without a certain degree of irony, for although the core of the Eagle's "proofs" is largely consistent with scientific and philosophical theories of the time, and thus informative, the Eagle is using these scientific principles, as Clemen notes, to explain the existence of a fantastical castle hovering in the sky. Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 98. Within the world of the dream, the Eagle's explanations have value, for the castle *does* exist there, but it is an open question how convincing the Eagle's "proofs" are when applied to the real world. While Chaucer is not entirely dismissive of the Eagle's rational and empiricist methods (and indeed, I argue, shows that they have a certain value), he does not conclusively endorse them as a source of truth. In fact, the display of the limitations of these approaches to knowledge, in the form of flaws in the Eagle's arguments and the presentation of myth as an alternative source of value, casts doubt on their status as sources of absolute truth, as Delany discusses at length. Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 69–86. It could be that in its shaky relationship to truth the poem encourages readers to wonder rather than to seek certainty in response to reading it.

parallel between Geffrey's earlier self-described act of wondering and what he is doing

during the lull in the Eagle's lesson. And the Eagle calls this pattern of thought, as Geffrey

did before, fantasy.

What do Geffrey and the Eagle mean by this term? "Fantasie," sometimes treated as

a synonym for "imagination" in medieval discourses, but at other times differentiated from

it, tends to signify, first and foremost, one of the faculties of the human mind: in its most

basic sense, the faculty that produces images based on information from the senses.[160] The

term, however, was defined so variously in medieval faculty psychology that it is difficult to

come up with a single unitary definition.[161] The Middle English Dictionary reflects this

ambiguity, defining "fantasie" as:

> (a) One of the mental 'faculties' or 'bodily wits', variously classified in scholastic
> psychology and literary tradition as to its supposed location in the brain and its
> functions, whether the imagined apprehension and recall of sensory data, the
> formation of delusive images or ideas, musing about the past or speculation about
> the future, the devising of works of art, etc.; the imagination (in various of its
> functions); also, the supposed seat of this faculty; (b) the operation of this faculty;
> the use of the imagination (in various of its functions).[162]

The functions of imagination and fantasy were various indeed in classical and medieval

thought. Aristotle attributes so many activities to the imagination "that is difficult to find a

---

[160] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "fantasie, n.," 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15263/track?counter=1&search_id=10325748; Murray Wright Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1927), 179, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013941821; Alastair Minnis, "Medieval imagination and memory," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume II: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 239, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521300070; Carolyn P. Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in* The Canterbury Tales (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 6, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015050791931.

[161] As Murray Wright Bundy puts it bluntly in his classic study: "There is no consistent mediaeval theory of imagination." Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought*, 177.

[162] *MED*, s.v. "fantasie, n."

coherent theory of imagination at the heart of them."[163] Avicenna distinguished between a "higher" and "lower" imagination with different functions.[164] Albertus Magnus retained this distinction between an image-producing "imaginatio" and an image-combining "phantasia," but sometimes referred to both as "phantasia."[165] Thomas Aquinas combined "imaginatio" and "phantasia" into a single faculty and regarded "vis imaginativa" as the image-combining faculty.[166] Scholars disagreed over whether the imagination was active or passive.[167] And all of this philosophical disagreement, while it certainly informed popular conceptions of the imaginative faculty, does not necessarily explain how Chaucer is using the term.

What does seem to be consistent in both of Geffrey's episodes of "fantasye," however, is a state of uncertainty and questioning, a kind of emotionally charged recall of images,[168] a seeking for connections between remembered impressions and present experiences, and an effort to understand the present based on the combination of the two.[169] When he first wonders in the Eagle's claws, he compares his present experience to examples from his past reading—calling up remembered images of human flight and

---

[163] Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 33.

[164] Karnes, 41–42.

[165] Karnes, 41–42; Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought*, 187–90.

[166] Minnis, "Medieval imagination and memory," 242.

[167] Minnis, 240–42.

[168] For the medieval understanding of memory-images as fundamentally "affective," in the sense that they are "sensorily derived and emotionally charged," see: Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 59.

[169] Indeed, the imagination was often granted a "recombinative" function in medieval faculty psychology, so that it did not simply form images based on new sensory information but also combined them with other remembered images. For an overview of medieval theories on this recombinative faculty of the mind, see: Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, 6–11.

seizure by eagles in an effort to find a match for the baffling information currently coming

to him from his senses.[170] And when he engages in contemplation in the heavens, he does

likewise, connecting what he has seen on the back of the Eagle with previous accounts he

has read of the heavens.

It is this kind of emotionally engaged, image-driven contemplation, and its results,

that Chaucer labels, in this work, as "fantasie." And it is this kind of mental activity that is

implicitly linked with the activity of "wondering." In the lull in the Eagle's explanation, then,

Geffrey is allowed to wonder. And as a result of this wondering, he comes to conclusions

that allow him to take a stance in favor of the potential of wonder as a learning tool, and of

wonder*ing* as a means for deriving new lessons from old texts.

Geffrey's episode of wondering begins with an observation of his present

circumstances, as he looks beneath him at all of the sights he has seen on the back of the

Eagle and marvels at the greatness of God (964-71). Having considered his experiences, he

is reminded of a passage in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and recounts:

> And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,
> That writ, "A thought may flee so hye
> Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
> To passen everych element,
> And whan he hath so fer ywent,
> Than may be seen behynde his bak
> Cloude" — and al that y of spak. (972-8)

In his wondering, he draws a link between his past reading and the present sights he has

---

[170] One could regard his entire experience, technically, as a product of his imagination, since the
work is a dream vision. Thus, Geffrey is undergoing an experience generated by his fantasy in which
he uses his fantasy to understand material that is removed by two degrees from his actual sensory
experience. But this is a bit too meta for my purposes.

seen.[171] And by thinking on Boethius's words, a new idea enters into his mind: the idea that

what he is viewing on his apparently physical journey with the Eagle is also accessible to

the traveler on a mental journey. This thought introduces an element of uncertainty into his

contemplation. If he could imagine these sights with the help of philosophy, is he really

seeing them, or is this journey all in his head? As he relates:

> Thoo gan y wexen in a were,
> And seyde, "Y wot wel I am here,
> But wher in body or in gost
> I not, ywys, but God, thou wost,"
> For more clere entendement
> Nas me never yit ysent. (979-84).

Part of what causes Geffrey's confusion is the fact that he understands things more clearly

than he ever has before. He has never experienced "more clere entendement," and this, in

addition to his reflections on Boethius, leads him to ponder if it is the result of a spiritual

vision. He concludes, however, that God knows, and therefore he does not need to pursue

the question further. Having resolved that he does not need to know whether or not he is

on this journey in body or soul, he ends his reflections by connecting his present

experience with his past reading once more:

> And than thoughte y on Marcian,
> And eke on Anticlaudian,
> That sooth was her descripsion
> Of alle the hevenes region,
> As fer as that y sey the preve;
> Therfor y kan hem now beleve. (985-90)

---

[171] Depending on when the *House of Fame* was written relative to Chaucer's translation of
Boethius's *Consolatio*, "Geffrey" might not only be considering his past experience of reading
Boethius but also his past experience of translating his work. As Deanne Williams puts it: "His flight
through the heavens makes him think, not of Dante, but of his own work. At this time, Chaucer's
Boece, a translation of Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*, might have been an incomplete project
lying on his desk or, perhaps, was just occupying his mind." Williams, "The Dream Visions," 161. If
this is the case, this suggests an even stronger indication that in thinking of Boethius, Geffrey is
personalizing his reflections.

Whereas before, he used his reading of Boethius to help him make sense of his experience of the heavens, here he uses his experience of the heavens as a means to validate his reading of Martianus Capella and Alanus de Insulis. Because he has seen that some of these authors' descriptions of the heavens are accurate, he feels comfortable taking their astrological accounts as true in the whole.[172]

As a result of his period of wondering and forming connections, Geffrey is able to gain new insights and come to new conclusions. Once he has had time to wonder—to marvel at, but also to process, what he has learned, he discovers that he is able to do what the Eagle does without the Eagle's intervention. The Eagle uses Geffrey's experience to elucidate scientific concepts and the ideas found in books. And as he wonders, Geffrey does the same thing himself, drawing links between his experience and his reading to

---

[172] There is, however, a certain circularity to Geffrey's reflections, if one considers that the sights Geffrey is "experiencing" and using to evaluate his reading come from the very same books that Geffrey is using his experience to verify. As Fyler notes, even though "Chaucer and the Eagle repeatedly use the dream experience to prove the truth of written fictions," the possibility that Geffrey's dream "simply recapitulates his reading" and the fact that, within the dream, "the world outside mirrors the books it is supposed to supplant," so that a "topography" taken from Martianus and Alanus is used to prove the validity of their works, creates the effect that the dream has "no independent authority of its own." Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 51–52. See also: John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 149, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015079202357. Judith Ferster likewise comments on how Geffrey's experience is both mediated and constituted by his prior reading of *Anticlaudianus*, and Jill Mann and Beryl Rowland both observe the purely literary nature of Geffrey's "experience," as the Eagle presents "bookish learning" to Geffrey in the guise of experience, and books are used to evaluate the truth of other books. Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 18; Beryl Rowland, "The Art of Memory and the Art of Poetry in the *House of Fame*," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 51, no. 2 (June 1981): 169; Mann, "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer," 4. Despite the circularity inherent in a dream "experience" derived from books being used to evaluate the truth of these books, however, the fact remains that within the fictional framework of the dream, Geffrey is presented as having new experiences and considering them in light of works he remembers reading. Thus, I choose to analyze this passage in terms of the fiction it presents, bearing in mind that it can also be read ironically, as a potential critique rather than a measured endorsement of Geffrey's eagle-derived approach to reading.

understand concepts and to come to new conclusions.[173] The Eagle, through its method of teaching him, has taught him a method he can use to teach himself. But in order to claim it, Geffrey needs to take a moment to wonder.

Through his wondering, Geffrey realizes he does not need literal wings to explore the heavens. If Boethius is right, and Geffrey can contemplate the heavens just as well in mind as in body, then he doesn't need the Eagle to carry him amongst the stars and thoroughly explain them to him. Nor does he need to know for certain if he is there in body or in soul. He can combine what he has seen with what he has read and develop his own insights from his own imperfect knowledge—and his own imagination.[174] Inasmuch as his reading seems to cohere with his experience, he can give a measured credence to the things he reads. Inasmuch as the things he reads shed light on his experience, he can use his

---

[173] As Lara Ruffolo puts it: "The literary lists of Book II show anonymous authors of grammars and romances rubbing shoulders with renowned writers in the storehouse of Geffrey's mind, their works providing him with a range of mental experiences with which to compare both his current dream and future reading." Lara Ruffolo, "Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's *House of Fame*: Destruction and Definition Through Proliferation," *The Chaucer Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 331, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095813.

[174] This wondering, it is true, will not necessarily lead to certain knowledge or determinate answers to his questions. After all, when Geffrey first wonders in the Eagle's claws, he is unable to find a match between his reading and his experience and remains baffled as to the meaning of his journey, for which his reading has not prepared him. And, as many have noted, the poem is often skeptical about the possibilities of definitively locating Truth in literature or experience (See note 71 above). Even if Chaucer is taken to be saying that one can never definitively determine the truth-value of a piece of discourse, however, I am not convinced that he is therefore suggesting that one can never learn anything valuable (or true) from a comparison between literature and life. Perhaps it is more apt to say that one cannot be *sure* of the truth of literature (McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity*, 65–67.) and therefore one ought to approach it with circumspection—and perhaps a good deal of wonder and wondering. With a bit more experience and observation, Geffrey is able to understand the present situation better, have a better grasp of which texts relate to his present experience, and to wonder about this experience more productively, even if he still has questions. The value seems to be in allowing the continuance of wonder rather than rushing to conclusions (or refusing to make any decisions without the conviction of certainty).

reading to elucidate his experience and his experience to make sense of his reading.[175] And

inasmuch as there are some things he may never understand, he can, in contradiction to the

Eagle's goals, accept this uncertainty and continue to wonder.[176]

Over the course of their journey, the Eagle has brushed aside wonder and

interrupted Geffrey's wondering. When Geffrey gets a chance to think for himself, however,

he discovers both the value of the Eagle's methods (treating wonder as a diagnostic and

using it as an impetus to learn by consulting reading and experience) and the value of

allowing himself to wonder—to follow these steps himself in the space of his own mind, to

come to his own conclusions, and, perhaps, to content himself with a little less certainty. He

knows that he can find answers in books, and he reserves the right to do so at his own

leisure, and in his own way. As a result, when the Eagle tells him to let his fantasies be, and

asks him "Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?"[177] Geffrey says no (993). He gives three reasons

for his refusal: The first, that he is too old, and the second two, given after the Eagle

---

[175] Of course, the connections a reader sees between his reading and his experience are never entirely free from bias: what a reader notices in his reading will be conditioned by his experiences and expectations, and his understanding of his experience may be conditioned by his prior reading, as Jill Mann and Judith Ferster observe. Mann, "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer," 3–8; Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*, 3–4. Geffrey's negotiation between reading and experience is not going to grant him objective truth. Geffrey himself seems to acknowledge this when he states that he "thoughte" his authors' descriptions were "sooth . . . As fer as that y sey the preve; Therfore y kan hem now beleve." (985-990). He sees that their definitions are true "as far as" he can see, and so he believes them on this basis, but he stops short of saying that he knows them to be true. If truth is not entirely accessible through either reading or experience, however, one can still come to understand things better by negotiating between them, and permitting oneself to wonder about them.

[176] Indeed, Delany reads this episode as expressing Geffrey's acceptance of the fideistic idea that whereas "Subjective experience . . . provides no absolute certainty," one can use faith to liberate oneself from the constraints of proof and instead accept poetic explanations for the things of the world. Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 85.

[177] This appears to be a rhetorical question, since the Eagle's resistance to Geffrey's refusal suggests that he fully expected Geffrey to say yes.

attempts to persuade him further, that

> . . . hyt is no nede.
> I leve as wel, so God me spede,
> Hem that write of this matere,
> As thogh I knew her places here;
> And eke they shynen here so bryghte,
> Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte
> To loke on hem." (1011-17)

In this explanation, although he does not say so explicitly, it is clear that Geffrey is building

off of his previous experience of wondering. Having recognized the truth-value of his

reading material by comparing it to his experience, he is able to determine that it is

accurate enough for him to believe in it, and that he can use it for future speculations.

Having realized that he can contemplate the heavens in his own mind, he does not need the

Eagle to carry him there. And just to make it clear that he neither wants nor needs to see

the stars in person, he cites a practical objection: they might blind him.

It would appear that here, he is satisfied with what he has learned. Having

experienced wonder, gotten explanations from the Eagle, continued to wonder, and gained

understanding ("clere entendement") and belief as a result, his wonder can be understood

as quelled. We return back to where we were at the start of the *Aeneid*, with an edified

reader—only this time we get to see the learning process: this is how wonder can be

replaced with knowledge. To cease to wonder prematurely can be akin to staring into the

void, into a vast desert of all one could have learned, but to choose to stop wondering once

one has learned one's fill can also, as Geffrey demonstrates, be satisfying.

One could argue, of course, that he is being premature here—that he is *too* satisfied

with the limited knowledge he has gained.[178] In rebuffing the Eagle, however, he can also be

understood as leaving room for *continued* wonder at the works he reads. Indeed, by

rejecting the Eagle's over-explanation, Geffrey can be seen as taking a stand against the

"need" to rationalize the wondrous in literature, or to treat literature as a tool to rationalize

the wondrous in life. As mentioned above, the Eagle exhibits a multi-pronged approach to

knowledge-gathering: using texts to understand (and validate) experience and using

experience to understand (and verify) texts. The end-goal of this process is to crush one's

wonder under the edifying weight of textual and empirical authorities. In this form of

reading, one can only "understand" a work when one has subjected it to either moralization

or empirical examination, establishing definitively how it fits into the grand schema of

one's natural philosophical and moral knowledge.[179] And in order for a work to be valuable,

according to the Eagle, one *must* do so, and do it as thoroughly as possible, replacing

wonder at the natural world with insights from literature and wonder at literature with

insights about the natural world. This approach *can* lead to knowledge and understanding.

Geffrey sees for himself that it can. But this totalizing impulse towards explanation and

---

[178] And many have. Indeed, Geffrey's refusal to let the Eagle show him the stars is an object of much scholarly bafflement—bafflement that usually concludes in criticism of Geffrey. See, for example: Williams, "The Dream Visions," 162.

[179] Van Dussen refers to this process as "integration," and argues that Chaucer often depicts such movements of integration in his works, moving from a "disconcertingly particular and unaccountable thing" to "classification, system, and relationship." Van Dussen, "Things," 479. His argument is that although Chaucer sometimes depicts "disruptive objects" as "utterly particular to their perceivers, unavailable for classification or integration back into the relationship between human experience and the natural order," Chaucer ultimately regards the "attempt to integrate" as "significant, even necessary." Van Dussen, 479. Indeed, Chaucer is interested in systems of knowledge and classification, and he is, as I hope I have shown, not entirely hostile to the idea of integrating baffling objects into human systems. I would argue, however, that he does not treat this drive to classify and integrate as either an imperative or something that needs to occur quickly. Even if one ultimately classifies the wondrous object, there is still a benefit in letting it remain, for a time, an object of wonder.

verification can also be severely limiting.

We see this in the Eagle's treatment of the tales of Alexander, Scipio, Daedalus, and Icarus as verifications of the possibilities of human flight, reduced from complex and variably signifying narratives into antidotes for wonder (913-924).[180] We see it likewise when the Eagle blends his discussion of the Milky Way with a recital of the story of Phaeton, in which he concludes that is unwise to let a fool govern that which he cannot control (956-959). Here, astrological fact becomes a means to validate the moral meaning of a poetic work, and a poetic work becomes part of the factual history of an astrological body, demonstrating that it "ones was ybrent with hete" (940).[181] And we see it when, after Geffrey has twice refused to learn "the sterres names, lo, / And al the hevenes sygnes therto, / And which they ben," the Eagle gives his justification for striving so hard to teach Geffrey these things (996-9). This justification is a statement about the uses and interpretation of poetry. The Eagle argues that Geffrey ought to learn more about the stars:

> For when thou redest poetrie,
> How goddes gonne stellifye
> Bridd, fissh, best, or him or here,
> As the Raven or eyther Bere,
> Or Arionis harpe fyn,
> Castor, Pollux, or Delphyn,
> Or Athalantes doughtres sevene,

---

[180] As Delany notes, however, in turning these figures into scientific exempla, the Eagle neglects the most common exemplary use to which their stories are put: as expressions of "a particular moral: that men must acknowledge limits to their understanding of nature and, consequently, to their power over it." Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 80. The effect is a kind of rebuke of the Eagle's impulse towards complete understanding through observation and authority. As Delaney puts it: "The Eagle's optimistic faith in intellect and observation as the keys to nature is balanced by the mythic perception of a mysterious universe," a perception, I argue, Geffrey leaves room for in his ultimate refusal to allow the Eagle to show him the stars. Delany, 83.

[181] As Fyler puts it: "Just as, according to the Eagle, the placing of the House of Fame verifies Ovid's description in *Metamorphoses* 13, so the constellations are apparently in heaven primarily to establish the veracity of myth." Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, 149.

How alle these arn set in hevene;
For though thou have hem ofte on honde,
Yet nostow not wher that they stonde. (1001-10)

In the Eagle's opinion, Geffrey needs to learn about the names and positions of the stars so that he can know which constellations the myths he reads refer to. The Eagle does not seem to consider, however, that one could derive benefit from these poems without a technical knowledge of which heavenly bodies they signify and where one might spy these bodies in the night sky. Stories, poems, treatises, experiences, observations, in the Eagle's view, all have to be fitted into explanatory frameworks: whether scientific or moral. And he feels an urgent need to equip Geffrey with these frameworks: to teach him the names and positions of the stars so he can see how poems fit into them, to teach him the physical principles of sound so he can locate the floating castle of Fame, to grant him the moral structure he can use to allegorize the natural world. And having satisfied himself with less than certainty, having blended to his satisfaction the poetic, philosophical, and empirical without managing to classify every aspect of his experience, Geffrey says no.

Geffrey does not mention wonder in his explanation for why he does not want the Eagle to teach him. But in refusing to allow the Eagle to explain the stars to him, he is also leaving room for himself to interpret of the tales of the stars on his own terms: to read them, if he chooses, in light of the astrological treatises or to read them as poetry, subject to different standards of evaluation than scientific texts.[182] He is claiming the intellectual

---

[182] For an early argument that Chaucer here "refuses to mingle science with poetry" and "sees poetry as a realm of its own," see: H. L. Levy, "'As Myn Auctour Seyth,'" *Medium Ævum* 12 (1943): 34, https://doi.org/10.2307/43626253. While I disagree with Levy's contention that Chaucer seeks to draw a hard line between science and poetry (as Clemen notes, Chaucer is, after all, making science the subject of his poetry), I do agree that Geffrey's resistance to the Eagle's offer can be understood as a way of expressing resistance to the idea that literature need be read exclusively through the lens of natural philosophical principles. Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, 98n1.

autonomy to think for himself and to form his own conclusions. And he is rejecting the Eagle's offer to turn every myth into the tale of Phaeton—a work whose meaning is utterly foreclosed. By giving himself the mental space to make his own interpretations, Geffrey is leaving space for wonder in his reading. And the Eagle recognizes this. After Geffrey rebuffs the Eagle, the Eagle does continue to explain things and to treat wonder as diagnostic. But he does not accompany Geffrey inside the House of Fame, merely praying that he learns something valuable there. And although it is his "entente" that Geffrey learn something in the House of Rumor, the Eagle leaves him to find this thing out on his own (2000).

Geffrey's journey with the Eagle thus exemplifies the value of taking time to marvel at and to think about the material one reads. One can do this on one's own—one does not need an authoritative voice to explain everything.[183] Nor does one need to make oneself out to *be* this authority, fitting every work, every text, into a controlling structure. Geffrey displays his ambivalence towards this approach when he rejects the Eagle's offer to show him the stars. Yet he also learns the value of the Eagle's method, in the sense that, by linking his reading and his experience, he is able to understand things better than he ever has before. And as he progresses, Geffrey will continue to demonstrate the value of treating wonder as a learning opportunity while also valuing it as an experience. He will be able to diagnose where he has more to learn without rejecting the uncertainty that comes along the way.

---

[183] And indeed, although Geffrey does not seem to object to the Eagle's method of considering things in terms of books, authority, and experience, it is clear that, as an authority himself, the Eagle is a bit suspect. On this topic, see, for example: Delany, *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, 74–75; Williams, "The Dream Visions," 156, 160–62.

Part 4: The House of Fame

When the Eagle drops Geffrey off at the House of Fame, Geffrey is eager to learn and to explore. At first, he is quick to moralize what he sees, observing the names that have melted from the icy rock along with the reputations of their owners, and commenting: "But men seyn, 'What may ever laste?'" (1147). Once he views the wondrous House of Fame, however, he begins to observe without attempting to immediately make sense of what he is seeing. He looks and listens intently, gathers observations, and only when he has finished viewing the House of Fame does he express his conclusions about the whole.

His conclusions, however, seem to be lacking. When explaining his dissatisfaction with what he has learned in the House of Fame, Geffrey first states that he came there hoping:

> Somme newe tidynges for to lere,
> Somme newe thinges, y not what,
> Tidynges, other this or that,
> Of love or suche thynges glade.
> For certeynly, he that me made
> To comen hyder, seyde me,
> Y shulde bothe here and se
> In this place wonder thynges;
> But these be no suche tidynges
> As I mene of (1884-94)

Geffrey has seen wonders in the House of Fame, but he has not found new tidings there. Instead, he has mostly discovered things he already knows:

> For wel y wiste ever yit,
> Sith that first y hadde wit,
> That somme folk han desired fame
> Diversly, and loos, and name.
> But certeynly, y nyste how
> Ne where that Fame duelled, er now,
> And eke of her descripcioun,
> Ne also her condicioun,
> Ne the order of her dom,

Unto the tyme y hidder com. (1897-1906)

As mentioned above, Geffrey has only gotten new information from the things he has wondered at. He has wondered at Fame's dwelling, her description, and some aspects of how she announces her judgments. These few new details, however, are not the vast and wondrous quantity of tidings the Eagle promised him.

Why is he so dissatisfied with what he has seen in the House of Fame? The answer may be in Fame's approach to the words that enter her house. For even more so than the Eagle, Fame is fixated on classifying, categorizing, and arranging every piece of language that comes within her purview. And unlike the Eagle, who is emphatic that *certain knowledge* ought to be the thing that replaces wonder and ambiguity, Fame is willing to settle for *certainty* alone. Her assistant, Eolus god of wind, has two trumpets, "Clere Laude" and "Sklaundre," and when Fame hears the stories of individual people, she immediately picks one of these two binary categories with which to classify them (1575, 1580).[184] Having done so, she refuses to budge from her judgment: she has determined how her petitioners will be known, and will brook no complaint. Fame has, of course, no consistent method; she assigns reputations to people randomly, in way that only sometimes reflects the truth of their deeds.[185] But she neither deliberates before making her judgments nor admits any uncertainty after she has made them. Fame herself is incapable of wonder. And since categorization, generalization, and classification are themselves hostile to wonder, her actions make it harder for Geffrey to find anything wondrous in her halls. Indeed,

[184] There *is* a non-binary element to her judgments, since she can also determine how much praise or blame each person receives, with some receiving more or less than their desert. See McGavin, *Chaucer and Dissimilarity*, 64. This can also be understood, however, as a form of classification within the broader categories of "slander" and "praise."

[185] See McGavin, 63–65.

although Geffrey can still find wonder in the sheer proliferation of strange, beautiful, and potentially meaningful things in Fame's house, this experience is hampered by the fact that so much of what he sees there is either sorted and categorized before he arrives or placed in categories immediately after.

Outside of the House of Fame, Geffrey is able to wonder at the marvelous edifice of the House itself, and at all of the people surrounding it. This staggering quantity of potential information, presented in a fashion unprecedented in Geffrey's experience, fixes him to the spot, and he fills his senses with everything he can. But as Geffrey looks closer and observes the profusion of embodied songs and stories, it becomes evident that all of the people whose works Fame has preserved have already been sorted.[186] All along the outer wall, musicians have been arranged in designated niches based on the instruments they play. The harpists, for example, are all placed adjacent to each other in one part of the wall; Geffrey hears Orpheus

> pleyen on an harpe . . .
> And on his syde, faste by,
> Sat the harper Orion,
> And Eacides Chiron,
> And other harpers many oon,
> And the Bret Glascurion;

---

[186] This arrangement of sights in the House of Fame has been interpreted as a dramatization of the formation of a memory palace, whereby one assigns memories to evocative images and arranges them in a mental location in order to make them easier to recall. See, for example: Rowland, "The Art of Memory and the Art of Poetry in the *House of Fame*"; Mary J. Carruthers, "Italy, *Ars Memorativa*, and Fame's House," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Proceedings* 2 (1986): 179–88, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/660971/pdf. In this sense, it is Chaucer/Geffrey who has sorted these sights and then surveys them in the space of the dream. It is true that within the framework of the dream, unless it is understood as divinely inspired, everything Geffrey sees is coming from his own memory and imagination, and therefore, in some ways, organized by him. The fact that Fame herself is depicted as engaging in an act of sorting, however, suggests to my mind that the thorough arrangement of things in her House can be understood as characterizing both Fame herself, and the reading practices that she emblematizes, and which Geffrey confronts (and practices) in the space of his dream. As Carruthers argues, each of the memory "places" in the poem "embodies a different aspect or meaning of Fame." Carruthers, 186.

> And smale harpers with her gleës
> Sate under hem in dyvers seës (1201)

The pipers, for their part, are separated from the harpists, placed "afar" and "behind" them:

> Tho saugh I stonden hem behynde,
> Afer fro hem, al be hemselve,
> Many thousand tymes twelve,
> That maden lowde mynstralcies
> In cornemuse and shalemyes,
> And many other maner pype (1215-19)

And "in an other place" entirely, Geffrey sees "hem that maken blody soun/ In trumpe, beme, and claryoun." (1237-40). Those who work magic, or those who perform magic "tricks" likewise appear to be placed in their own separate area outside the gates of Fame (1259-1281). There is a marvelous crowd of people surrounding the House, but it is a strikingly orderly one.

The same is true inside the House of Fame proper. The profusion of heralds, with their wondrously embroidered garments, are pre-labeled by the coats of arms they bear. The crowd of petitioners to Fame are conveniently sorted into categories based on their deeds and desires, even before Fame judges them. Even the symbolic incarnations of well-read books, in which Geffrey might still find some matter for wonder, have been subdivided, labeled, and organized—their authors, topics, and principal characters given physical form and neatly arranged in rows on pillars of thematically appropriate metals and minerals.[187] Thus upon a pillar of lead and iron stands Josephus the Hebrew, author of *The History of the Jews*, who bears the fame of the Jewish people upon his shoulders with the help of seven other writers (1430-1440). As Geffrey explains, the metals of the pillar

---

[187] As Carruthers puts it: "Each column is of a different material appropriately associated with some quality of the remembered author or his story, and other appropriate images cluster about the figure." Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 188.

represent the "batayles, / As wel as other olde mervayles," that these authors wrote about, since iron is the metal of Mars, god of war, and lead is the metal of Saturn, representing the astrological association of the planet with the Jewish people, whom Geffrey calls the "secte saturnyn" (1432).[188] Because iron is associated explicitly with war, Statius, who wrote the *Achilleid* and the *Thebaid*, stands on a pillar of iron painted in suitably warlike manner with tiger's blood, and he bears on his shoulders the name and fame of Achilles and the warlike history of Thebes (1456-1463). Near him, likewise on a pillar of iron, is Homer, and clustered about him are other writers who dealt with the subject of Troy, and who bear up the weighty fame of the city between them (1464-1474). Virgil stands upon iron, carrying the fame of Aeneas, and next to him is Ovid, on a pillar of copper, Venus's metal, bearing up the name of the god of Love (1481-1491).[189] Authors who wrote of Rome stand upon "sternely" wrought iron pillars, and Claudian, who wrote of the rape of Proserpina, stands upon a pillar of sulfur and "bar up al the fame of helle, /of Pluto, and of Proserpyne" (1499-1512).[190] Every text is sorted by topic and author, after the manner of a library. Indeed, Fame's system of categorization can be understood as a kind of cosmic Dewey Decimal System.

But unlike a library, in which call numbers aid one in finding books, or even like a memory palace, in which evocative images are keyed to textual passages held in memory, the House of Fame is nearly devoid of actual narratives. As the Eagle explains, when words

---

[188] Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 987n1431, 1432–36.

[189] Copper was associated with Venus, and thus appropriate for "Venus clerk Ovide" (1487). Fyler, 988n1482.

[190] The choice of sulfur is appropriate because of the status of Pluto and Proserpina as chthonic deities and the traditional association of sulfur/brimstone with hell and the underworld. Fyler, 988n1482.

enter Fame's house, they take on the shape of their speakers (1074-82). What Geffrey sees

as he walks the halls of Fame, then, are not words but *people.* And what these people

uphold are not stories but the reputations of the people and things these stories describe.

Outside of the House of Fame, on its outer walls, are clustered people who could

potentially tell stories to Geffrey: "mynstralles / And gestitours that tellen tales / Both of

wepinge and of game, / Of al that longeth unto Fame." (1197-1200). None of them seem to

be doing so, however. Geffrey reports hearing music and the instruments used to make it,

and he watches magicians and performers do their tricks, but he does not recount that he

heard any tales there. Inside the House of Fame the situation is similar. Geffrey sees

authors, standing on their pillars, and he sees the topics they carry. None of their stories,

however, seem to be present for Geffrey to hear or read. The only tales that one might hear

there are the accounts that Fame's petitioners make of their actions. But these narratives

are vague, schematic, and identical amongst large groups of people.

Nor do actual narratives accompany their authors, except in symbolic form. Geffrey

sees the fame of Troy, ponderous, weighty, borne with difficulty by the authors who wrote

of it, but he does not appear to see any of the stories these authors actually wrote (1471-

74). He sees "The Latyn poete Virgile, / That bore hath up a longe while / The fame of Pius

Eneas," but there is no sign of the *Aeneid* graven on the wall as it was in the temple of Venus

(1483-5). And he sees, standing by Lucan, "alle these clerkes / That writen of Romes

myghty werkes," but none of the works they wrote. Indeed, he concludes that:

>The halle was al ful, ywys,
>Of hem that writen olde gestes
>As ben on treës rokes nestes;
>But hit a ful confus matere
>Were alle the gestes for to here
>That they of write, or how they highte. (1514-19)

The hall is full of the people who wrote the tales, and Chaucer's use of the subjunctive suggests that it would be a confusing matter if one tried to hear all the "gestes" they wrote. Geffrey does not indicate, however, that one could actually read or hear any gestes there.

Fame circulates words and narratives. This is one of her key functions.[191] But what she gathers, sorts, and arranges in her *house* are the names and fames of authors and their subjects: not the tales themselves. All she retains for herself is sufficient material to categorize the narratives that reach her. And when faced with famous authors and the fame of their works, Geffrey sees nothing to wonder at. Indeed, none of the things he describes as wondrous in the House of Fame are the authors. The closest he gets is his remark that Ovid "hath ysowen wonder wide / The grete god of Loves name" (1488-9). Here, however, he is referring to the reach of Ovid's works, not to Ovid himself. And his use of wonder as an intensifier ranks this fact with the speed at which Geffrey falls asleep or how low he bends when peering at the rock beneath the House of Fame. This is why Geffrey learns so little: because there is so little in the House of Fame to wonder about. It is not that he has nothing to learn from these authors' works, or that there is nothing wondrous about their tales. But within the House of Fame, these tales are present only via allusion. Nobody is telling them.

What, then, is the lesson of the House of Fame? Perhaps the answer is that wonder does not inhere in the name of an author or an author's reputation. It does not inhere in the venerability of the subject matter. Wonder is in the stories themselves—and in the experience of reading them. Indeed, what Geffrey finds wondrous in the House of Fame is not Virgil on his pillar holding up the reputation of Troy, but the striking, evocative way he describes the goddess of Fame, which can be seen in Chaucer's own wondrous depiction of

---

[191] Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory," 862.

her.[192] Geffrey is unmoved by Ovid holding up the name of the god of love, but once he gets to the House of Rumor, he will marvel at the mixtures of lies and truth he finds there—the same mixture that swirls through the House of Fame in the *Metamorphoses*.[193] Even reading the stripped-down *Aeneid* of his memory, Geffrey is moved by the tale of Dido and *Aeneas*. But in the shells of these texts, fitted into rigid interpretative schemes; reified through their conversion to topics, authors, and reputations; instrumentalized, functionalized, frozen—there is nothing left to wonder at. And their example shows what the consequences are of this kind of hermeneutic rigidity, of the desire to make every text conform to one's categories. One cannot learn.

In Fame, there is a desire to arrest and control the motion of words.[194] Winged wonders come pouring in from every corner of the world to meet her, and she gives them their names and durations and sends them on their way (2110-2117). Tales come to her—rich, varied, complex, their shapes and proportions altered by the bodies of their tellers, and she strips them of detail and casts them in metal. People come to her with their life stories, only to be herded into groups, the details of their experiences stripped away, reduced to a binary classification: Good or Bad. Fame's judgment has been called a parody of the Last Judgment, and indeed, one sees in her house the imperative to fix, eternally, all of the messy particularities of human life and language.[195] It is no coincidence that Fame's

---

[192] Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 987n1368-92.

[193] Fyler, 989n1925-85, 989n2108-9.

[194] See Rebecca Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37, no. 1 (2015): 101–5, https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2015.0022.

[195] Fyler, "Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*," 987n1368-92. On Fame's efforts to "fix" poetic meaning and structure, see: Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," 103–5.

house rests upon a block of ice. She seeks to freeze narratives. And the fact that she fails: that the stories she sends out keep coming back in different forms, that the ice keeps melting, that Geffrey still finds wonders in her halls, speaks to the power of narrative to resist all of the efforts that are made to fix its meaning. [196]

If one looks at stories, looks at them without the sense that one already knows what they mean, then one may very well learn something new from them. If one reads without trying to fit a book into a fixed interpretative structure, then one may find that there is much in it that resists one's classifications. If one goes seeking tales without needing to know if are true or false, then one leaves open the possibility that they may be both—or neither. Reading in this way, one opens oneself to the experience of wonder. And when one wonders, then one can learn.

Faced with the beautiful barrenness of the House of Fame, a fitting counterpoint to the emptiness of the desert, Geffrey turns towards the House of Rumor. It is there that he will, at last, find what he is looking for.

Part 5: The House of Rumor

In the House of Rumor, the obstacles that impeded wonder are removed or mitigated, and

---

[196] As Rebecca Davis observes, "in *The House of Fame* things rarely stay put. Juxtaposed to its fixed structures, numerous catalogues spew forth an ever-burgeoning supply of poetic matter, stuff that not only takes up space in the poem's massive archive but also *moves*, disordering its organization." Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," 104. The natural motion of objects both within and without Fame's palace necessarily works against Fame's efforts to fix them in place. Davis, 104–5. And, as Davis argues, this accommodation of motion and resistance to fixity informs Chaucer's own poetic efforts: "In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer explores how to make a poem—a stable and effective formal structure—out of materials that won't stop moving. The solution toward which *The House of Fame* points is not to ''fix'' matter but to invent forms that accommodate its dynamism." Davis, 104–5.

Geffrey is able to apply the lessons he has learned. Faced with the marvelous profusion of tidings flying into and out of the House of Rumor, and at a loss to categorize the house itself, for a time Geffrey simply observes, making a note of every kind of tiding he sees and placing them into small clusters based on topic. Despite this small gesture towards categorization, he does not fit these tidings into any grander structure beyond his own list.[197] Rather, as he relates, he simply wonders: "y wondred me, ywys, /Upon this hous" (1988-89). As he looks, he devises comparisons between it and other objects of his experience, as he does when he is wondering in the Eagle's claws. He likens it to the Labyrinth, to a basket, and to a cage (1920-23, 1935-40). He mentally measures how long it is, relates it to the concept of chance or "Aventure, / That is the moder of tidynges," and states that its tidings are as loud as a stone flung from a catapult and as numerous as leaves on the trees in summer (1979, 1982-83, 1931-34, 1945-47). But there is no set pattern to the imagery, no natural explanation for how a house so fragile can stay together, no effort to moralize what he sees. Instead, he experiences what the House presents to him, giving his imagination free play to recombine the images from his senses with those in his memory as his fantasy makes the House legible.

As we have seen, in a state of fantasy, as he wonders, Geffrey moves between the past and present in his mind, engaging in a kind of unstructured free-association.[198] It is a state that evokes the creative potential of the imagination, as it was described in a number

---

[197] On Chaucer's general use of lists in the *House of Fame*, and the relationship of these lists to questions of literary authority, see: Ruffolo, "Literary Authority."

[198] In her analysis of Geffrey's thoughts when he is "wondering" among the heavens, Lara Ruffolo notes that when Geffrey lists all of the things he beheld from the air, he lists them without subordinating conjunctions or any kind of narrative structure: the lists alone unify the things he describes. Ruffolo, 331–32.

of works of medieval faculty psychology.[199] As Nicholas Watson puts it:

> . . . the medieval imagination was not just a translator of sense impressions into images. In dreams, visions, fantasies, and states of creativity associated with poetic or artistic making, it was a locus of mental activity in its own right. In the intricate mental space of the "higher" imagination of the *fantasie* in particular, images rise up thickly from the storehouse of the memory or are admitted anew by way of the senses. There, they mysteriously combine and recombine to form previously unknown objects—marvels, inventions, novelties, monsters, engines, and all manner of other constructs . . . with or without the effectual aid of the reason.[200]

In wondering about the House of Rumor, then, Geffrey is both experiencing the house as he sees it and using it to generate new images and connections, new fusions of his past and his present. This associative state is marked, here, by the generation of varied similes and metaphors: motion as "swyft as thought," sounds as loud as catapulting stones, entrances as many as leaves on trees, a house like a wicker basket (1924, 1931-34, 1945-46, 1935-40). Through these verbal hybrids, Geffrey seeks to capture some of the hybrid nature of the House itself. And in doing so, he is generating, for himself, a series of wonders.

In her analysis of Chaucer's treatment of wonders and metaphors in the *Squire's Tale*, Michelle Karnes notes how the experience of the wondrous can inspire the creative imagination. Wondrous objects, as she argues: "excite mental activity, prompting the formation of creative images that reveal the object and bring it to life more effectively than sensory ones."[201] And metaphoric images, Karnes argues, parallel in literary form the

---

[199] Medieval understandings of psychology varied in whether they attributed the capacity to recombine images to the imagination/fantasy or to a different mental faculty. Philosophers agreed, however, that human beings did have this capacity to creatively invent images, and many attributed this ability to the imagination or fantasy itself. Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, 6–11.

[200] Watson, "The Phantasmal Past," 13.

[201] Karnes, "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor," 461.

images that wonder produces in the mind.[202] As literary instruments, metaphors are able to

"defamiliarize objects and concepts."[203] "At a linguistic level," as Karnes explains, metaphor

"transplants words outside of their proper ambit, locating them in a context in which they

do not strictly belong. The mind registers and is arrested by their displacement," much like

the mind of a viewer faced with a wondrous object.[204] In suggesting a similarity and

connection between unlike objects, metaphor "presents a challenge to comprehension, but

a diverting and instructive one."[205] And "by generating a productive confusion, it provokes

investigation much like wonder itself. It is a fitting response to a marvel and also a marvel

in its own right."[206]

Wonder, then, is generative, both of a rich array of mental images and of the kinds of

wondrous words that can evoke wonder in a reader.[207] By allowing himself to experience

wonder, and to wonder, without interruption, Geffrey is thus both learning from the *House*

of Rumor and creating wonders of his own. The *House of Fame* has often been regarded as a

kind of *ars poetica*, with the tidings Geffrey seeks functioning as the materials from which

---

[202] Karnes, 475.

[203] Karnes, 482.

[204] Karnes, 482.

[205] Karnes, 482.

[206] Karnes, 482.

[207] For a fuller analysis of some of the links between wonder and the imagination in medieval thought, see: Michelle Karnes, "Marvels in the Medieval Imagination," *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 327–65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43577347.

he will craft his poetry.[208] And as we see on the threshold of the House of Rumor, the experience and pursuit of wonder is *essential* to his ability to both gather and generate these tidings. Seeking out the wondrous puts him in a position to recognize new tidings, since it helps him recognize potential sites of learning. And by creating a kind of free play of the mind, wonder helps Geffrey to generate tidings for himself.[209]

It is this "play" that Geffrey engages in when he finally arrives within the House of Rumor. Carried through one of the house's many openings by the Eagle, Geffrey at first simply observes, watching stories grow and change as they move from person to person in a vital, chaotic flux that is so different from the drive towards stasis in the House of Fame.[210] While the tidings he sees taking shape *do* seem to have some kind of recognizable

---

[208] Davis identifies Kittredge as the first to articulate this view of the House of Fame, although others have discussed it since. Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," 102n4; Kittredge, "The House of Fame," 102. See, for example: Buckmaster, "Meditation and Memory in Chaucer's 'House of Fame.'"

[209] Indeed, Nicholas Watson argues that the House of Fame can be understood as a figure for the unrestrained imagination. As he argues:

> . . .the House of Rumour is an imaginative faculty operating in the absence of any guiding influence from reason: ramshackle, viridescent, unjudgmental, and earthbound. Whirling like a watermill (to use Cassian's useful analogue), the House is powered by a constant stream of sensory impressions that it instantly manufactures into phantasms, which represent at once the fleeting impressions of consciousness and the collective tittle-tattle of uncensored social observation we call gossip, and which crowd together, exchange their single tidbit of news, then thrust their way back into the world again. Watson, "The Phantasmal Past," 14.

See also Fyler's contention that: "The House of Rumor turns 'as swyft as thought' (1924); indeed, it is in some sense thought itself (just as the pillars in Fame's hall recall the places of an art of memory." Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, 152.

[210] As Fyler puts it: "In place of silence, the *House of Fame* . . . celebrates, in a backhanded fashion, the generative powers of fallen language itself, the cacophony that perpetually underlies and undermines human efforts to impose unity, clarity, and order on the evanescent works of human memory and art. This is a language that is itself the very essence of energy and ceaseless flux." Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, 154.

characteristics that allow him to classify them as truth or lies, he shows no preference for either. Rather, he marvels at their growth, their motion, their recombination. And once he has observed this wondrous place, he begins to run about faster than anyone, eager "for to pleyen and to lere." (2133). Learning happens in motion, in experience, in and among the wondrous. And in learning new tidings and passing them on, one engages in creation—both of meaning and of narrative.[211]

It is this kind of creation that Chaucer ultimately invites his readers to engage in when they wonder at the works they read. By crafting a work that is full of wonder—that thematizes it, that demonstrates it, that teaches it, and that strives to evoke it, Chaucer works to grant his readers everything they need to generate their own wondrous insights. Whether through crafting creative works or their own creative approaches to their everyday problems, they will be equipped to use what they learn to engage with the world and empower themselves.[212] This is the hope of the *House of Fame*. And based on my own experience of reading, and writing about it, I would say that it is successful.

---

[211] It is not, as Watson is careful to note, creation *ex nihilo*—the medieval imagination creates via recombination. Watson, "The Phantasmal Past," 18.

[212] For the argument that, in the *House of Fame* as in other works, Chaucer seeks to encourage his readers both to actively interpret his texts and to produce their own, see: Miller, "Writing Dreams to Good."

Conclusion

In response to changing demographics and expanding readerships, Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer both strove, in their own ways, to open up learning opportunities for their readers. Understanding the vital importance of personally engaged reading experiences, they sought to grant their readers the tools they would need to shape the lessons they learned to their lives. It is impossible to say for certain exactly how successful their efforts were, or how many readers they managed to reach and teach. But the evidence of reception history suggests that at least some of their readers approached their works precisely the way they wished them to.

Certainly a number of modern female scholars have seen reflections of themselves in Christine de Pizan. In a recent essay, Louise D'Arcens explicitly states that she identifies with Christine de Pizan and suggests that de Pizan encouraged such responses in her readers: in part by creating, through her narrative persona, Christine, an image of a female writer that affords "copious" interpretations, and that, by "embodying a general concept of female authorship, provides her readers with a way of understanding themselves and representing themselves to others."[1] D'Arcens sees similar evidence of identification in the writings of other scholars studying Christine de Pizan, such as Maureen Quilligan and Michele Roberts.[2] Helen Solterer likewise perceives an impulse amongst feminist critics to identify with Christine de Pizan, although she suggests that in order to avoid an anachronistic elision of the differences between de Pizan's era and ours, we must consider

---

[1] Louise D'Arcens, "Her Own *Maistresse*?: Christine de Pizan the Professional Amateur," in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 131, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106018812187.

[2] D'Arcens, 131, 131n39.

both medieval senses of *identificare*— "determining the various integral properties that make up a phenomenon" as well as "entertaining those properties, taking them upon the self and experiencing their similarities or sameness (*idem*)."[3] Alyson Carr likewise attributes the enduring appeal of Christine de Pizan's works in part to the way that her compelling authorial persona induces readers to traverse the worlds of her texts with her: "It is possible to see ourselves in her, and we are able to have the moment of "this is how it is" that allows us to take something with us out of the story material for our own self-formation. We enter her stories, and if we truly enter them with her, even six hundred years after she wrote them, we leave them changed."[4]

These sentiments are not limited to modern scholars. There are also subtle hints that readers closer to de Pizan's time might have seen themselves in her work as well. In her analysis of de Pizan's responses to the *Roman de la rose*, Helen Solterer notes the example of a 15th century woman who, perhaps seeing herself in the *Enseignmens* that Christine de Pizan wrote for her son, composed a didactic work for her own sons, in which she lauded Christine de Pizan. As she puts it:

> Cristine de pisay a si bien et honnestement parle, faisant dictiers et livres a l'ensaignement de nobles femmes et aultres, que trop seroit mon esperit failly et surpris voulloir emprendre de plus en dire. Car quant j'auroie la science de Pallas ou l'eloquence de Cicero, et que, par la main de Promoteus, fusse femme nouvelle, sy ne porrose je parvenir ne attaindre a sy bien dire comme elle a faict.[5]

---

[3] Helen Solterer, *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 215.

[4] Allyson Carr, *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change*, PDF (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 208.

[5] Quotation from *Enseignemens que une dame laisse a ses filz en form de testament*, B. N. f.fr. 19919, fol. 27, quoted in Helen Solterer, "Christine's Way: The *Querelle du Roman de la rose* and the Ethics of a Political Response," in *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 174.

[Christine de Pizan has spoken so well and so honestly, composing treatises and books concerning the instruction of noblewomen and others, that my spirit would surely be surprised and overwhelmed in trying to say anything more. For even when I had the learning of Minerva or the eloquence of Cicero and were I, by the hand of Prometheus, to become a new woman, even then I could still not reach her level nor attain speaking as well as she has done.]6

Much as Christine does before the figures of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, or before her

sibylline guide, this writer humbles herself, asserting that she cannot hope to achieve

Christine de Pizan's level of skill.7 And yet much as Christine de Pizan sees herself in the

---

6 This translation is Solterer's. It can be found in Solterer, 174–75.

7 Indeed, de Pizan likewise suggests her unworthiness to be led by the Sibyl, although of course she is eager for her instruction. As she proclaims:

Ha ! tres amee et singuliere
Amarresse de sapïence,
Du colege de grant scïence
Des femmes qui prophetiserent
Par grace divine, et qui erent
Du secret de Dieu secretaires,
Signiffians divers misteres,
Dont vous vient tele humilité
Qu'a moy par tel benignité
Magnifestez vostre plaisir ?
Bien sçay que c'est pour mon desir
Plus que ce n'est pour mon savoir,
Car je n'en puis pas tant avoir
Que soit mon entendement digne
Que vostre voulenté benigne (*Chemin*, 666-80)

["Ah! Well beloved and excellent
Lover of knowledge,
From the college of great knowledge
Of women who prophesied
By divine grace, and who were
Scribes of the secret of God,
Proclaiming diverse mysteries,
Whence came your humility
That to me with such benignity
You manifest your pleasure?
Indeed, I know that it is for my desire
More than my knowledge,

444

Sibyl, and seeks to write like her, this anonymous woman strives to emulate Christine de

Pizan: if not to attain to her skill then to follow in her footsteps as a writer and teacher.

In addition to these textual tributes, one can find multimodal evidence of a kind of

fantasy of immersion in the City of Ladies. Susan Groag Bell has painstakingly uncovered

evidence that amongst the collections of several royal women of the Renaissance, including

Elizabeth I, Margaret of Austria (who owned two copies of the *Book of the City of Ladies*),

Mary of Hungary, and Anne of Brittany, were sets of tapestries based on the City of Ladies:

acquired as gifts, inherited from parents, purchased from artisans, or possibly chosen or

commissioned for themselves.[8] The largest set of these tapestries, if displayed together,

would have "measured as much as 55 meters in length" (about 180 feet) and towered over

the viewers at an impressive 4.34 meters high (over 14 feet).[9] Covering the walls and

tucked around corners, as tapestries often were, they would create an intensely immersive

panorama.[10] To stand in a room in which such works of art were displayed, surrounded by

the images of great women of the past, would be to find oneself as if within the City of

Ladies itself. One can only imagine what their viewers felt.

In Chaucer's robust reception history we can likewise perceive traces of readerly

curiosity and wonder. Wondering how the *Canterbury Tales* might have looked if it were

finished, writers have striven to complete it, adding their own sequels, epilogues, and

---

For I have not so much of it
That my understanding might be worthy
For your good will"] (Ramke Lardin, trans., *Long Learning*, 666-80)

[8] Susan Groag Bell, *The Lost Tapestries of the* City of Ladies*: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 86–87, 2–8, 123, 109.

[9] Bell, 156, 167.

[10] Bell, 65.

tales.[11] In the prologue to his *Siege of Thebes*, John Lydgate imagines the pilgrims arriving at

Canterbury, placing himself in Chaucer's place as a pilgrim-narrator.[12] The author of the

Tale of Beryn does likewise, taking the pilgrims to Canterbury and then beginning their

round trip home, although missing manuscript pages make it unclear if they ever

completed it.[13] Some writers strove to continue the *Cook's Tale*, or give him the non-

Chaucerian tale of *Gamelyn*, and another scribe gave the Plowman his own tale.[14] And in

striving to complete the *Squire's Tale*, Edmund Spencer cast himself as Chaucer's successor,

or perhaps another Chaucer.[15]

    Much as Spencer did, generations of readers have personalized the lessons of

Chaucer's texts to themselves.[16] Endlessly translated, adapted, and modified, Chaucer's

corpus has been shaped to the needs, ambitions, and desires of a staggering number of

readers—appropriated both to shore up the discourses of power and to strive against

---

[11] On fifteenth-century efforts to add to the *Canterbury Tales*, see: John M. Bowers, ed., The Canterbury Tales*: Fifteenth Century Continuations and Editions*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992). On fifteenth century and modern efforts to compose additions and continuations to the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's other works, see: Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 74–108.

[12] Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, 84–85; Bowers, *Fifteenth Century Continuations*, 11–12.

[13] Bowers, *Fifteenth Century Continuations*, 55.

[14] Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, 86.

[15] Andrew King, "Spenser, Chaucer, and Medieval Romance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (2010; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 558–59.

[16] For a more ambivalent look at the tendency for readers to identify with Chaucer, see: Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, xiii–xxiv.

them.[17] And the prodigious number of articles on Chaucer's works still published every year speaks to their continuing capacity to evoke wonder in their readers.

Whether by cultivating readers' identification and teaching them to assemble their own insights or by granting them reading strategies that encouraged them to trade certainty for wonder, Christine de Pizan and Geoffrey Chaucer offered their diverse audiences ways to read their lives into texts and to read texts into their lives. In doing so, they welcomed them to embrace the synthesis of text and experience and use it to guide them on their own unique paths of learning.

---

[17] For a recent overview of this topic, see: Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy, "Afterlives," in *A New Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 7–19.

Bibliography

Primary Sources and Translations

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1: The Inferno*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

———. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 2: Purgatorio*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling. Vol. 2 of <i>The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

———. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 3: Paradiso*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. PDF, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucla/reader.action?docID=618597&query=paradiso.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Vol. 2. 3 vols. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 73. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926. https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL073/1926/volume.xml.

Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*. Edited and translated by R. W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, and Earl Jeffrey Richards, trans. *Othea's Letter to Hector*. By Christine de Pizan. Toronto: Iter Press, 2017.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Concerning Famous Women*. Translated by Guido A. Guarino. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963.

de Boer, Cornelis, ed. *Ovide moralisé: poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*. Vol. 5. Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1938. https://archive.org/details/DeBoerOvideMoralise5.

Boethius. *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*. Translated by P. G. Walsh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Brown-Grant, Rosalind, trans. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. By Christine de Pizan. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

Brownlee, Kevin, trans. "From *The Path of Long Study*." In *The Collected Works of Christine de Pizan*, 59–87. By Christine de Pizan, Ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed., 662–83. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

———. *The House of Fame*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed., 347–73. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

———. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Edited by Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Cicero. "De Amicitia." In *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination.*, translated by W. A. Falconer, 108–212. Loeb Classical Library 154. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923. https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL154/1923/volume.xml.

Green, Karen, Constant J. Mews, Janice Pinder, and Tania Van Hemelryck, trans. "*The Book of Peace*." In *The Book of Peace*, 200–321. by Christine de Pizan, ed. Karen Green et al. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14.

Horace. *Satires, Epistles, and* Ars Poetica. Edited and translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015004940196.

Hugh of St. Victor. "De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum." Edited by William M. Green. *Speculum* 18 (1943): 484–93.

Hult, David F., trans. "Christine de Pizan to Jean de Montreuil, June-July 1401." In *Debate of the* Romance of the Rose, 50–63. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

de Insulis, Alanus. *Anticlaudianus*. Edited by R. Bossuat. Paris: J. Vrin, 1955.

Jerome [Eusebius Hieronymus]. "Adversus Jovinianum." In *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri: Opera Omnia*, edited by J.-P. Migne, 23:cols. 221–352. Patrologiæ: Cursus Completus. Paris: Excudabat Vrayet, 1845. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044012674545.

———. "Against Jovinianus." In *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, translated by W. H. Fremantle. A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., vol. 6. Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1893. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175015712220.

Lawson, Sarah, trans. *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*. Revised Edition. By Christine de Pizan. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

de Lorris, Guillaume, and Jean de Meun. *Le Roman de la rose*. Edited by Ernest Langlois. Vol. 3. 5 vols. Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1921. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31210001251394.

———. *The Romance of the Rose*. Translated by Charles Dahlberg. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Matheolus. "Lamentations de Matheolus." In *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et le Livre de leesce de Jehan le Fèvre, de Resson: (Poèmes Français du XIVe siècle)*, by Matheolus and Jean Le Fèvre, edited by A. G. Van Hamel, translated by Jean Le Fèvre, Vol. 1. Paris: Émile Bouillon, 1892. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x000489552.

McLeod, Glenda, and Charity Cannon Willard, trans. *The Vision of Christine de Pizan*. By Christine de Pizan. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005.

Ovid. "Heroides." In *Heroides. Amores*, edited by G. P. Goold, translated by Grant Showerman, 82–87. Loeb Classical Library 41. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914. https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL041/1914/volume.xml.

Petrarca, Francesco. *Petrarch's Secret, or the Soul's Conflict with Passion*. Translated by William H. Draper. Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1978.

de Pizan, Christine, Jean Gerson, Jean de Montrueil, Gontier Col, and Pierre Col. *La Querelle de La Rose : Letters and Documents*. Edited by Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane. North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures ; 199. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978.

de Pizan, Christine. "*Le Livre de paix*." In *The Book of Peace*, edited by Karen Green, Constant J. Mews, Janice Pinder, and Tania Van Helmelryck, 200–321. by Christine de Pizan. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14.

———. Letter "A maistre Pierre Col, secretaire du roy nostre sire." In *Le Débat sur le* Roman de la Rose, edited by Eric Hicks, 115–50. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977. Reprint, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1996.

———. Letter "A moult souffisant et sçavant personne, maistre Jehan Johannez, secretaire du roy nostre sire." In *Le Débat sur le* Roman de la Rose, edited by Eric Hicks, 11–22. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977. Reprint, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1996.

———. "*The Livre de la cité des dames* of Christine de Pisan : a critical edition." edited by Maureen Cheney Curnow, Vol. 2. PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975.

———. *Epistre Othea*. Edited by Gabriella Parussa. Second printing. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2008.

———. *Le Chemin de longue étude*. Edited and translated by Andrea Tarnowski. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000.

———. *Le livre de l'advision Cristine*. Edited by Christine Reno and Liliane Dulac. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2001.

———. *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune*. Edited by Suzanne Solente. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1959.

———. *Le Livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*. Edited by Suzanne Solente. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1936. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015012966662.

———. *Le Livre Des Trois Vertus*. Edited by Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1989.

Ramke Lardin, Kelly, trans. *The Book of the Path of Long Learning*. By Christine de Pizan. self-pub.: Createspace, 2018. Kindle.

Richards, Earl Jeffrey. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. By Christine de Pizan. London: Picador, 1983.

Smith, Geri L., trans. *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*. By Christine de Pizan, edited and translated by Geri L. Smith. Toronto: Iter Press, 2017.

Tarnowski, Andrea, ed. *Le Chemin de longue étude*. Translated by Andrea Tarnowski. By Christine de Pizan. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006.

———. "Eclogue 4." In *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, edited by G. P. Goold, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, 1:48–53. Loeb Classical Library 63. 1916. Reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL063/1916/volume.xml.

Secondary Sources and Criticism

Adams, Tracy. "Christine de Pizan, Isabeau of Bavaria, and Female Regency." *French Historical Studies* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2008-011.

———. "Christine de Pizan." *French Studies* 71, no. 3 (2017): 388–400. https://academic.oup.com/fs/article/71/3/388/3859856.

Allen, Elizabeth. *False Fables and Exemplary Truths in Later Middle English Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Allen, Judson Boyce. *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A decorum of convenient distinction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.

Amtower, Laurel. "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's House of Fame." *Philological Quarterly*, 2000, 273–91. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2152672952/E04087DC00B145F3PQ/1.

———. *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000.

Ascoli, Albert Russell. "From *auctor* to author: Dante before the *Commedia*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed., 46–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Autrand, Françoise. *Christine de Pizan: Une femme en politique*. Paris: Fayard, 2009.

Barrington, Candace, and Jonathan Hsy. "Afterlives." In *A New Companion to Chaucer*, edited by Peter Brown, 1st ed., 7–19. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.

Baswell, Christopher. *Virgil in medieval England: figuring the* Aeneid *from the twelfth century to Chaucer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015045624783.

Beckwith, Sarah. "'Dyverse Imaginaciouns of Crystes Lyf': Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Crucifixion Piety." In *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, 45–77. London: Routledge, 1993.

Bell, Susan Groag. "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Woman." *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 173–84. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177735.

———. *The Lost Tapestries of the* City of Ladies*: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Bennett, J. A. W. *Chaucer's* Book of Fame*: An Exposition of "The House of Fame."* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005289635.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Benson, Larry D. Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 3–22. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

———. "The Canon and Chronology of Chaucer's Works." In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, xxvi–xxix. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Blamires, Alcuin, Karen Pratt, and C. W. Marx, eds. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Blanchard, Joël. "Christine de Pizan: tradition, expérience, et traduction." *Romania* 111, no. 441/442 (1/2) (1990): 200–235. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45040712.

———. "Compilation et légitimation au XVe siècle." *Poétique* 19, no. 74 (1988): 139–57. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x001429133.

Blatt, Heather. *Participatory Reading in Late-Medieval England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3zp01n.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, and Earl Jeffrey Richards. Introduction to *Othea's Letter to Hector*. By Christine de Pizan, translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Earl Jeffrey Richards, 1–30. Toronto: Iter Press, 2017.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate. "Christine de Pizan and the Misogynistic Tradition." In *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 297–311. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate. "Christine de Pizan and the Political Life in Late Medieval France." In *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, edited by Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady, 9–24. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Boitani, Piero. *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984.

Bornstein, Diane. "Self-Consciousness and Self Concepts in the Works of Christine de Pizan." In *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Diane Bornstein, 11–28. Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981.

———. "The Ideal of the Lady of the Manor as Reflected in Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*." In *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Diane Bornstein, 117–28. Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981.

Bouchet, Florence. *Le Discours Sur La Lecture En France Aux XIVe et XVe Siècles: Pratiques, Poétique, Imaginaire*. Bibliothèque Du XVe Siècle 74. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008.

Bowers, John M., ed. The Canterbury Tales*: Fifteenth Century Continuations and Editions*. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992.

Brabant, Margaret, and Michael Brint. "Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan's *Cité Des Dames*." In *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Margaret Brabant, 207–22. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015025281802.

Brown-Grant, Rosalind. "Glossary for *The Book of the City of Ladies*." by Christine de Pizan, 244–79. translated by Rosalind Brown-Grant. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

———. "Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*." by Christine de Pizan, xvi–xxxvii. translated by Rosalind Brown-Grant. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

———. "Notes on *The Book of the City of Ladies*." by Christine de Pizan, 241–43. translated by Rosalind Brown-Grant. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

———. *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258.

Brown, Meg Lota. "Reputation as Rectitude in *The Book of the Three Virtues*." In *Au Champ Des Escriptures: IIIe Colloque International Sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 Juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 447–59. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Brownlee, Kevin. "Dante and the Classical Poets." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed., 141–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

———. "Discourses of the Self: Christine de Pizan and the *Rose*." *Romanic Review* 79, no. 1 (1988): 199–221. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/discourses-self-christine-de-pizan-rose/docview/1290863055/se-2?accountid=14512.

———. "Le projet « autobiographique » de Christine de Pizan : histories et fables du moi." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 5–24. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

———. "Literary Genealogy and the Problem of the Father: Christine de Pizan and Dante." In *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, edited by Theodore J. Cachey Jr., 205–35. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035010498.

———. "Structures of Authority in Christine de Pizan's *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*." In *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, edited by Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens, 131–50. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014631470.

Bryan, Jennifer E. "'Following Echo': Speech and Common Profit in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42, no. 1 (2020): 73–109. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2020.0002.

Buckmaster, Elizabeth. "Meditation and Memory in Chaucer's *House of Fame*." *Modern Language Studies* 16, no. 3 (1986): 279–87. https://doi.org/10.2307/3194908.

Bundy, Murray Wright. *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1927. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013941821.

Burrow, J. A., and V. J. Scattergood. "Explanatory Notes to *The Shipman's Tale.*" In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 910–13. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Wonder." *Americal Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1997): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/102.1.1.

Carr, Allyson. *Story and Philosophy for Social Change in Medieval and Postmodern Writing: Reading for Change.* PDF. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Carruthers, Mary J. "Italy, *Ars Memorativa*, and Fame's House." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Proceedings* 2 (1986): 179–88. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/660971/pdf.

———. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Carruthers, Mary J., and Jan M. Ziolkowski. "Introduction to *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures.*" edited by Mary J. Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

Case, Mary Anne C. "Christine de Pizan and the Authority of Experience." In *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, edited by Marilynn Desmond, 71–87. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Cawsey, Kathy. "Vernacular Transformation of the Latin Inheritance: Chaucer's *House of Fame*," 13–43. Boydell & Brewer, D. S. Brewer, 2020. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv105bbtc.6.

Cerquiglini-Toulet, Jacqueline. "Fondements et fondations de l'écriture chez Christine de Pizan. Scènes de lecture et Scènes d'incarnation." In *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, edited by Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis, 79–96. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.

———. "Le goût de l'étude : saveur et savoir chez Christine de Pizan." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 597–608. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2000.

———. *La couleur de la mélancolie: la fréquentation des livres au XIVe siècle, 1300-1415.* Paris: Hatier, 1993.

———. *The Color of Melancholy: The Uses of Books in the Fourteenth Century*. Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015040579172.

———. "L'étrangère." *Revue des langues romanes* 92, no. 2 (1988): 239–51. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x002269797.

Clemen, Wolfgang. *Chaucer's Early Poetry*. Translated by C. A. M. Sym. London: Methuen, 1968. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106001884201.

Cobban, Alan B. *English University Life in the Middle Ages*. London: Univeristy College London Press, 1999. eBook.

Coleman, Joyce. *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Coletti, Theresa. "Paths of Long Study: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28, no. 1 (2006): 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2006.0025.

Collett, Barry. "The Three Mirrors of Christine de Pizan." In *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, 1–18. Disputatio 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325.

Collette, Carolyn P. "Christine de Pizan: Mapping the Routes to Agency." In *Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385-1620*, 21–39. Turnhout: Brepols, 2006. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106018813409.

———. *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in* The Canterbury Tales. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015050791931.

Cooper, Helen. *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*. London: Duckworth, 1983. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31158009236604.

Copeland, Rita. "Medieval Theory and Criticism." In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Michael Groden, Martin Krieswirth, and Imre Szeman, 645–53. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.49015003006070.

———. *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Cropp, Glynnis M. "Boèce et Christine de Pizan." *Le Moyen Age* 87, no. 3–4 (1981): 387–417.

D'Arcens, Louise. "Her Own *Maistresse*?: Christine de Pizan the Professional Amateur." In *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, edited by Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, 119–45. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106018812187.

Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015066446975.

Davenport, Tony. *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

David, Alfred. *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046392612.

Davis, Rebecca. "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37, no. 1 (2015): 101–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2015.0022.

De Rentiis, Dina. "'Sequere me:' 'Imitatio' dans la 'Divine Comédie' et dans le 'Livre du Chemin de long estude.'." In *The city of scholars : new approaches to Christine de Pizan*, edited by Margarete Zimmermann, 31–42. European cultures 2. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994. http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&doc_number=006406172&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA.

Delale, Sarah. "Matière à nouvelles lectures : l'imaginaire de la composition littéraire chez Christine de Pizan." In *Matières à débat : La notion de matiere littéraire dans la littérature médiévale*, 631–44. Interférences. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017.

Delany, Sheila. "'Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan." In *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 312–28. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. Reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

———. "Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts." In *Chaucer in the Eighties*, edited by Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, 75–92. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010768995.

———. *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Descartes, René. *The Passions of the Soul*. Translated by S. Voss. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

Desmond, Marilynn. "Christine de Pizan's Feminist Self-Fashioning and the Invention of Dido." In *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*, New Edition., 195–224. Medieval Cultures 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

———. "The *Querelle de La Rose* and the Ethics of Reading." In *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, edited by Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady, 167–80. New York: Routledge, 2003.

———. *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*. New Edition. Medieval Cultures 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Diamond, Arlyn. "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer." In *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, edited by Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards, 60–83. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4280477.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Dulac, Liliane. "The Representation and Functions of Feminine Speech in Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*." In *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, edited by Earl Jeffrey Richards, translated by Christine Reno, 13–22. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

Durling, Robert M., and Ronald L. Martinez. Notes to Canto 1. In *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1: Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, 34–39. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Eberle, Patricia J. Explanatory Notes to *The Man of Law's Tale*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 854–63. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Echtermann, Andrea, and Sylvia Nagel. "Recuperating the Polyphony of Women's Speech: Dialogue and Discourse in the Works of Christine de Pizan." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe. Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, edited by Eric Hicks, 493–514. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Echtermann, Andrea. "Women's Dialogue in the *Epistre au dieu d'amours* and *Le Livre de la Cité des dames*." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 495–503. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Eckhardt, Caroline D. "Genre." In *A New Companion to Chaucer*, edited by Peter Brown, 1st ed., 185–99. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.

Edwards, Robert R. *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001302318.

Eldredge, Laurence. "Chaucer's *Hous of Fame* and the *Via Moderna*." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71, no. 1 (1970): 105–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43342524.

Farinelli, Arturo. *Dante e la Francia: dall'età media al secolo di Voltaire.* Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1908. http://archive.org/details/danteelafranciad00fari.

Farrell, Thomas J. "The 'Envoy de Chaucer' and the *Clerk's Tale.*" *The Chaucer Review* 24, no. 4 (1990): 329–36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25094139.

Felski, Rita. "Enchantment." In *Uses of Literature*, 51–76. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

———. "Recognition." In *Uses of Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Fenster, Thelma. "'Perdre son latin': Christine de Pizan and Vernacular Humanism." In *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, edited by Marilynn Desmond, 91–107. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

———. "La fama, la femme, et la Dame de la Tour : Christine de Pizan et la médisance." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 461–77. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

———. "Who's a Heroine? The Example of Christine de Pizan." In *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, edited by Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady, 115–28. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Ferguson, Margaret W. "An Empire of Her Own: Literacy as Appropriation in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames.*" In *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France*, 179–224. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Ferster, Judith. *Chaucer on Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Fletcher, Alan J. "Chaucer the Heretic." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 53–121. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2003.0057.

Forhan, Kate Langdon. *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015054447688.

Fradenburg, L. O. Aranye. "Simply Marvelous." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2004.0003.

Frow, John. *Genre*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Furrow, Melissa. *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009.

Fyler, John M. Explanatory Notes to *The House of Fame*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 977–90. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

———. *Chaucer and Ovid*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

———. *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015079202357.

Gabriel, Astrik L. "The Educational Ideas of Christine De Pisan." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (January 1955): 3–21. https://doi.org/10.2307/2707524.

Galloway, Andrew. "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*: A Generic Excursus." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 14 (1992): 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1992.0000.

Gauvard, Claude. "Christine de Pisan a-t-elle eu une pensée politique ? A propos d'ouvrages récents." *Revue Historique* 250, no. 2 (508) (1973): 417–30. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40952022.

———. "Christine de Pizan et ses contemporains : l'engagement politique des écrivains dans le royaume de France aux XIVe et XVe siècles." In *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, edited by Liliane Dulac and Bernard Ribémont, 105–28. Medievalia "Études christiniennes." Orléans: Paradigme, 1995.

Gayk, Shannon. "'To wondre upon this thyng': Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*." *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 138–56. https://doi.org/10.1179/104125710X12670930868171.

Gaylord, Alan T. "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor." *PMLA* 82, no. 2 (May 1967): 226–35. https://doi.org/10.2307/461292.

Geer, Rachel. "Intimate Politics: The Poetics of Social Engagement during the Hundred Years War." University of Virginia, 2014. https://doi.org/10.18130/V3KJ9H.

Ginsberg, Warren S. Explanatory Notes to *The Clerk's Prologue* and *Tale*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 879–84. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Grabes, Herbert. *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*. Translated by Gordon Collier. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1973. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Gray, Douglas. Explanatory Notes to *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 841–48. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Green, Karen, and Constant J. Mews, eds. *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*. Disputatio 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325.

Green, Karen. "Christine de Pizan and the Prophetic Tradition." In *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009*, 51–61. Florence: Alinea, 2013.

———. "Introduction." In *The Book of Peace*, by Christine de Pizan, edited by Karen Green, Constant J. Mews, Janice Pinder, and Tania Van Hemelryck, translated by Karen Green, Constant J. Mews, Janice Pinder, and Tania Van Helmelryck. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/romance/id/14.

———. "On Translating Christine de Pizan as Philosopher." In *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, 117–37. Disputatio 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063205325.

———. "Philosophy and Metaphor: The Significance of Christine's 'Blunders.'" *Parergon* 22, no. 1 (2005): 119–36. https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2005.0025.

———. "*Phronesis* Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I." In *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400-1800*. The New Synthese Historical Library 63. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007.

Greimas, Algridas Julien, and Teresa Mary Keane. "mirer (*v*.)." In *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français*, 417. Paris: Larousse, 2007.

———. "remirer (*v*.)." In *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français*, 543. Paris: Larousse, 2007.

———. "soûler (v.)." In *Grand Dictionnaire Moyen français*, 574. Paris: Larousse, 2007.

Gretsch, Mechthild. "Literacy and the uses of the vernacular." In *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, edited by Malcolm Godden and Lapidge, 273–94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Griffin, Miranda. "Transforming Fortune: Reading and Chance in Christine de Pizan's 'Mutacion de Fortune' and 'Chemin de Long Estude.'" *The Modern Language Review* 104, no. 1 (2009): 55–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/20468123.

Grudin, Michaela Paasche. *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Guarinos, Marion. "Individualisme et solidarité dans *Le livre des Trois Vertus* de Christine de Pizan." In *Sur le chemin de longue étude... actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*,

edited by Bernard. Ribémont, 87–99. Études Christiniennes 3. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046884956.

Hahn, Thomas. "Don't Cry for Me, Augustinius: Dido and the Dangers of Empathy." In *Truth and Tales: Cultural Mobility and Medieval Media*, 41–59. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015.

Hanning, R. W. "Roasting a Friar, Mis-Taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7, no. 1 (1985): 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0000.

Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2s2004t2/.

Haydock, Nickolas. "False and Sooth Compounded in Caxton's Ending of Chaucer's *House of Fame*." *Atenea* 26, no. 2 (2006): 107–29. Gale Literature Resource Center.

Hicks, Eric. "A Mirror for Misogynists: John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (8.II) in the Translation of Denis Foulechat (1372)." In *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, edited by Earl Jeffrey Richards, 77–107. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

Hilary, Christine Ryan. Explanatory Notes to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 864–74. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Ho, Cynthia. "Communal and Individual Autobiography in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*." *CEA Critic* 57, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 31–40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44377130.

Holderness, Julia Simms. "Christine et ses « beuves » : sens et portée de quelques assimilations abusives." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 149–60. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Huot, Sylvia. "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante." *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 361–73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43802011.

Irvine, Martin. "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame." *Speculum* 60, no. 4 (October 1, 1985): 850–76. https://doi.org/10.2307/2853727.

Jauss, Hans Robert. "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature." In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti, 76–109. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Jeay, Madeleine. "Traversée par le verbe : l'écriture de soi comme geste prophétique chez Christine de Pizan." *Dalhousie French Studies* 47 (Summer 1999): 7–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40837271.

Jensen, Emily. "'Winkers' and 'Janglers': Teller/Listener/Reader Response in the *Monk's Tale,* the Link, and the *Nun's Priest's Tale.*" *The Chaucer Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 183–95. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096008.

Johnson, Eleanor. "Against Order: Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Critiques of Causality." In *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, edited by Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld, 61–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108147682.

———. *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

———. *Staging Contemplation: Participatory Theology in Middle English Prose, Verse, and Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Jónsson, Einar Már. *Le Miroir: Naissance d'un genre littéraire*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995.

Jost, Jean E. "Chaucer's Literate Characters Reading Their Texts: Interpreting Infinite Regression, or the Narcissus Syndrome." In *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, edited by Albrecht Classen, 171–217. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.

Kamowski, William. "Varieties of Response to *Melibee* and the *Clerk's Tale.*" In *Chaucer in the Eighties*, edited by Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, 193–207. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010768995.

Karnes, Michelle. "Marvels in the Medieval Imagination." *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 327–65. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43577347.

———. "The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction." *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 209–28. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2020.0008.

———. "Wonder, Marvels, and Metaphor in the *Squire's Tale.*" *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 461–90. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24477794.

———. *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Kay, Sarah. "Melancholia, Allegory, and the Metaphysical Fountain in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre Du Chemin de Long Estude.*" In *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry*, 150–76. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

———. "The Didactic Space: The City in Christine de Pizan, Augustine, and Irigaray." In *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*, 438–66. Germanistiche Symposien Berichtsbände 23. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106011256432.

Kendrick, Laura. "Comedy." In *A New Companion to Chaucer*, 105–21. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.

Keskiaho, Jesse. "Re-visiting the libri Sibyllini: some remarks on their nature in Roman legend and experience." In *Studies in Ancient Oracles and Divination*, edited by Mika Kajava. Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013.

King, Andrew. "Spenser, Chaucer, and Medieval Romance." In *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, edited by Richard A. McCabe, 553–72. 2010. Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kiser, Lisa J. *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002471519.

Kittredge, George Lyman. "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage." *Modern Philology* 9, no. 4 (1912): 435–67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/432643.

———. "The House of Fame." In *Chaucer and His Poetry*, 73–107. 1915. Reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015009013700.

Knapp, Peggy A. "Alisoun Weaves a Text." *Philological Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 387–401. ProQuest.

———. *Chaucer and the Social Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1990. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001843826.

Krueger, Roberta L. "A woman's response: Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre du Duc des Vrais Amans* and the limits of romance." In *Women readers and the ideology of gender in Old French verse romance*, 217–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

———. "'Chascune selon son estat': Women's Education and Social Class in the Conduct Books of Christine de Pizan and Anne de France." In "L'Education des filles sous L'Ancien Régime: De Christine de Pizan à Fénelon," special issue,. *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature* 24, no. 46 (1997): 19–34. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015069021320.

———. "Christine's Anxious Lessons: Gender, Morality, and the Social Order from the *Enseignemens* to the *Avision*." In *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, edited by Marilynn Desmond, 16–40. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Kruger, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Laird, Judith. "Good Women and *Bonnes Dames*: Virtuous Females in Chaucer and Christine de Pizan." *The Chaucer Review* 30, no. 1 (1995): 58–70. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095914.

Lawson, Sarah. "Introduction to the Revised Edition." In *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or The Book of the Three Virtues*, by Christine de Pizan, xxviii–xxx, Revised Edition. Trans. Sarah Lawson. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Le Goff, Jacques. *The Medieval Imagination*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1985. Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Le Ninan, Claire. "Portraits de l'écrivain en clergesse dans quelques œuvres politiques de Christine de Pizan." *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes. Journal of medieval and humanistic studies*, no. 23 (June 30, 2012): 243–58. https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.12836.

———. *Le Sage Roi et la clergesse : L'Écriture du politique dans l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013.

Lechat, Didier. *« Dire Par Fiction » : Métamorphoses Du* Je *Chez Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, et Christine de Pizan*. Études Christiniennes 7. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2005.

Leicester, H. Marshall. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1525/9780520341241/html.

Leitch, L. M. "Sentence and Solaas: The Function of the Hosts in the *Canterbury Tales*." *The Chaucer Review* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1982): 5–20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093812.

Levy, H. L. "'As Myn Auctour Seyth.'" *Medium Ævum* 12 (1943): 25–39. https://doi.org/10.2307/43626253.

Leyerle, John. "Chaucer's Windy Eagle." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 247–65. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015059412067.

Lightsey, Scott. "Chaucer's Secular Marvels and the Medieval Economy of Wonder." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 289–316. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2001.0027.

Lorcin, Marie-Thérèse. "Christine de Pizan analyste de la société." In *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, edited by Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis, 197–205. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.

———. "*Le Livre des Trois Vertus* et le *sermo ad status*." In *Une femme de lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, edited by Liliane Dulac and Bernard Ribémont, 139–49. Medievalia "Etudes christiniennes" 16. Orléans: Paradigme, 1995.

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 106–9. The Crossing Press Feminist Series. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4401761.

Maddox, Donald. *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Mann, Jill. "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer." In *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature*, 1–12. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991.

———. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the* General Prologue *to the* Canterbury Tales. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h26t0h427.

———. *Feminizing Chaucer*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002.

Marenbom, John. "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, December 16, 2016. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/boethius/.

Margolis, Nadia. "Christine De Pizan: The Poetess as Historian." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 3 (1986): 361–75. https://doi.org/10.2307/2709658.

———. *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011.

Martin, Ellen E. "The Interior of His Mind: Exegesis in the *House of Fame*." In *The Rhetorical Poetics of the Middle Ages: Reconstructive Polyphony: Essays in Honor of Robert O. Payne*, edited by John M. Hill and Deborah Sinnreich-Levi, 106–29. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106012468135.

Martin, Robert. "mirer, verbe." In *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*. ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020. http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer.

———. "pourpris, subst. masc." In *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*. ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020. http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/pourpris.

———. "remirer, verbe." In *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*. ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020. http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer.

———. "saouler, verbe." In *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*. ATILF-CNRS and Université de Lorraine, 2020. http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/remirer.

McCormick, Samuel. "Mirrors for the Queen: A Letter from Christine de Pizan on the Eve of Civil War." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 273–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630802210344.

McGavin, John J. *Chaucer and Dissimilarity: Literary Comparisons in Chaucer and Other Late-Medieval Writing*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Presses, 2000. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015047535458.

McGinn, Bernard. "*Teste David Cum Sibylla*: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages." In *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, edited by Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple, 7–35. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985.

McGrady, Deborah. "Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and Her Readers." In *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel, 154–77. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

———. *Controlling Readers: Guillaume de Machaut and His Late Medieval Audience*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.

McLeod, Glenda. "Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de La Cité Des Dames*." In *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, edited by Earl Jeffrey Richards, 37–47. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

McNamer, Sarah. *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

McRae, Laura Kathryn. "Interpretation and the Acts of Reading and Writing in Christine de Pisan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*." *Romanic Review* 82, no. 4 (November 1, 1991): 412–33. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/interpretation-acts-reading-writing-christine-de/docview/1290879238/se-2?accountid=14512.

McWebb, Christine. "Lyrical Conventions and the Creation of Female Subjectivity in Christine de Pizan's *Cent Ballades d'Amant et de Dame*." In *Christine de Pizan and Medieval French Lyric*, edited by Earl Jeffrey Richards, 168–83. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.

Merkel, Maria. "Le Chemin De Long Estude: primo tentativo di imitazione dantesca in Francia." *La Rassegna Nazionale*, 2nd ser., 32 (April 1921): 189–211. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b2874137.

Middleton, Anne. "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II." *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (January 1978): 94–114. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2855608.

———. "The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs: Ensamples Mo than Ten as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales.*" *The Chaucer Review* 8, no. 1 (1973): 9–32. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093247.

Miller, Jacqueline T. "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame.*" *The Chaucer Review* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 95–115. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093821.

Miller, T. S. "Writing Dreams to Good: Reading as Writing and Writing as Reading in Chaucer's Dream Visions." *Style* 45, no. 3 (2011): 528–48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.45.3.528.

Minnis, Alastair. *Medieval Theory of Authorship*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014716354.

———. "Medieval imagination and memory." In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume II: The Middle Ages*, edited by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, 239–74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521300070.

———. *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

———. *Magister Amoris: The Roman de La Rose and Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Minnis, Alastair, V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith. *The Shorter Poems.* Oxford Guides to Chaucer. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015034437635.

Mitchell, J. Allan. "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity." *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2005.0001.

———. *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004.

Morrison, Susan Signe. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Wife of Bath and Vernacular Translations." *Exemplaria* 8, no. 1 (1996): 97–123. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/exm.1996.8.1.97.

Morse, Charlotte C. "The Exemplary Griselda." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7, no. 1 (1985): 51–86. https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0002.

Mosher, Joseph Albert. *The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1911. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t6h14768d.

Mühlethaler, Jean-Claude. "'Traictier de vertu au profit d'ordre de vivre': relire l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan à la lumière des miroirs des princes." In *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, edited by Angus J. Kennedy, Rosalind Brown-Grant, James C. Laidlaw, and Catherine M. Müller, Vol. 2. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002.

Nagel, Sylvia. "Polyphony and the Situational Context of Women's Speech in the *Livre des Trois Vertus*." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 504–15. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Nuttall, Jenni. "Patronage." In *A New Companion to Chaucer*, 1st ed., 307–18. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.

O'Brien O'Keeffe, Katherine. "Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Literary Culture." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford University Press, October 26, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.66.

Olson, Glending. *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Orlemanski, Julie. "Genre." In *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, edited by Marion Turner. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781118328736.

Ouy, Gilbert, Christine Reno, and Inès Villela-Petit. *Album Christine de Pizan*. Edited by Olivier Delsaux and Tania Van Hemelryck. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012.

Page, Barbara. "Concerning the Host." *The Chaucer Review* 4, no. 1 (1969): 1–13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093103.

Pagot, Simone. "Du bon usage de la compilation et du discours didactique : analyse du thème « guerre et paix » chez Christine de Pizan." In *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, edited by Liliane. Dulac and Bernard. Ribémont, 39–67. Medievalia "Études christiniennes" 16. Orléans: Paradigme, 1995.

Palomo, Dolores. "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*." *Philological Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 304–20. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1290929977.

Parkes, Malcolm. "The Literacy of the Laity." In *The Mediaeval World*, edited by David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby, 2:555–77. Literature and Western Civilization. London: Aldus Books, 1973. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015020696905.

Patterson, Lee. "'For the Wyves Love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman de La Rose and the Canterbury Tales." *Speculum* 58, no. 3 (1983): 656–95. https://doi.org/10.2307/2848963.

———. "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–75. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/659597/pdf.

Paupert, Anne. "Christine et Boèce. De la lecture à l'écriture, de la réécriture à l'écriture du moi." In *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, edited by Angus J. Kennedy, Rosalind Brown-Grant, James C. Laidlaw, and Catherine M. Müller, 3:645–62. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002.

Pitcher, John A. *Chaucer's Feminine Subjects: Figures of Desire in the Canterbury Tales*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Pomel, Fabienne. "La Sibylle, guide et double de Christine dans l'autre monde des lettres: *Le Chemin de longue étude* de Christine de Pizan." In *La Sibylle: Parole et representation*, edited by Monique Bouquet and Françoise Morzadec. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004. HTML, https://books.openedition.org/pur/30370.

———. "S'écrire en lectrice. Les métamorphoses de Christine de Pizan dans *Le Chemin de longue étude*." In *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, edited by Isabelle Brouard-Arends, 215–30. Interférences. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016. http://books.openedition.org/pur/35533.

Pratt, Karen. "The Context of Christine's *Livre des trois vertus*: Exploiting and Rewriting Tradition." In *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan (Glasgow 21-27 July 2000), published in honour of Liliane Dulac*, 3:671–84. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002.

Pugh, Tison. "Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath's Narrative Violence." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 33, no. 2 (2003): 115–42. https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0035.

Quillen, Carol E. *Rereading the Renaissance : Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

Quilligan, Maureen. *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité Des Dames. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Ribémont, Bernard. "Christine de Pizan : entre espace scientifique et espace imaginé (*Le Livre du Chemin de long estude*)." In *Une femme de Lettres au Moyen Age : Études autour de Christine de Pizan*, edited by Liliane. Dulac and Bernard. Ribémont, 245–95. Medievalia "Études christiniennes" 16. Orléans: Paradigme, 1995.

———. "Christine de Pizan écrivain didactique : la question de l'encyclopédisme." In *Christine de Pizan: Une femme de science, une femme de lettres*, edited by Juliette Dor and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, 71–93. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008.

Richards, Earl Jeffrey. "Christine de Pizan and Dante: A Reexamination." *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 222, no. 1 (1985): 100–111.

———. "In Search of a Feminist Patrology: Christine de Pizan and *Les Glorieux Dotteurs* of the Church." *Mystics Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1995): 3–17. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20717235.

Richardson, Cynthia. "The Function of the Host in *The Canterbury Tales*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 333–39. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40754105.

Rickert, Edith. "Chaucer at School." *Modern Philology* 29, no. 3 (1932): 257–74. https://www.jstor.org/stable/433612.

Rigby, S. H. (Stephen Henry). "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women." *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 2 (2000): 133–65. https://doi.org/10.1353/cr.2000.0024.

Rodrigues de Sousa, Sara. "Christine de Pizan, *femme savante*?" In *Christine de Pizan: Une femme de science, une femme de lettres*, edited by Juliette Dor and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, 115–29. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008.

Romagnoli, Patrizia. "Les formes de la voix: masques et dédoublements du Moi dans l'œuvre de Christine de Pizan." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 73–90. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Rothman, Irving N. "Humility and Obedience in the *Clerk's Tale*, with the Envoy Considered as an Ironic Affirmation." *Papers on Language and Literature* 9, no. 2 (1973): 115–27. ProQuest.

Rowland, Beryl. "The Art of Memory and the Art of Poetry in the *House of Fame*." *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 51, no. 2 (June 1981): 162–71.

Ruffolo, Lara. "Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's *House of Fame*: Destruction and Definition Through Proliferation." *The Chaucer Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 325–41. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095813.

Ruys, Juanita Feros. "Introduction: Approaches to Didactic Literature—Meaning, Intent, Audience, Social Effect." In *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods*, 1–38. Turnhout: Brepols, 2008.

Salter, Elizabeth. *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*. London: Edward Arnold, 1962. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000623925.

Saraceni, Madeleine L. "Chaucer's Feminine Pretexts: Gendered Genres in Three Frame Moments." *The Chaucer Review* 51, no. 4 (2016): 403–35. https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.51.4.0403.

Scala, Elizabeth. *Desire in the Canterbury Tales*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015.

Scanlon, Larry. *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Schibanoff, Susan. "Taking the Gold out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman." In *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, 83–106. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015038902394.

Schneider, Thomas R. "Chaucer's Physics: Motion in *The House of Fame*." In *The Passenger: Medieval Texts and Transits*, edited by James L. Smith, 115–29. Punctum Books, 2017. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66798.

Schwebel, Leah. "Redressing Griselda: Restoration through Translation in the *Clerk's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 47, no. 3 (2013): 274–99. https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.47.3.0274.

Sklute, Larry. *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000461967.

Slerca, Anna. "Christine de Pizan, Ceoffrey Chaucer et le thème du voyage allégorique." In *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009*, 195–202. Florence: Alinea, 2013.

Smith, Warren S. "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome." *The Chaucer Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 129–45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096004.

Sobecki, Sebastian. "Wards and Widows: *Troilus and Criseyde* and New Documents on Chaucer's Life." *ELH* 86, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 413–40. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/726186.

Solterer, Helen. "Christine's Way: The *Querelle du Roman de la rose* and the Ethics of a Political Response." In *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture*, 151–75. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

———. *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Spearing, A. C. *Medieval Dream-Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Stecopoulos, Eleni, and Karl D. Uitti. "Christine de Pizan's *Livre de La Cité Des Dames*: The Reconstruction of Myth." In *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, edited by Earl Jeffrey Richards, 48–62. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

Strohm, Paul. "Chaucer's Audience." *Literature and History* 5 (Spring 1977): 26–41. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1303914505/citation/BBE23B801D08444AP Q/1.

———. "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual." *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 137–45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093871.

———. "Middle English Narrative Genres." *Genre* 13, no. 3 (1980): 379–88. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106005791899.

———. *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2014.

———. *Social Chaucer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Tarnowski, Andrea. "Christine's Selves." In *Desireuse de plus avant enquerre . . . Actes du VIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan (Paris, 20-24 juillet 2006), Volume en hommage à James Laidlaw*, edited by Liliane. Dulac, Anne Paupert, Christine Reno, and Bernard. Ribémont, 181–88. Études Christiniennes 11. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2008.

———. "Pallas Athena, la science, et la chevalerie." In *Sur le chemin de longue étude... actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995*, edited by Bernard. Ribémont, 149–58. Études Christiniennes 3. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998.

———. "The Lessons of Experience and the *Chemin de long estude*." In *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, 181–97. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Tavormina, M. Theresa. Explanatory Notes to *The Merchant's Prologue* and *Tale*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, 884–90. edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Taylor, Andrew. "Authors, Scribes, Patrons, and Books." In *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, 353-. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

Taylor, Jane. "Sermon Joyeux." In *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198661252.013.4315.

Toynbee, Paget. "Christine de Pisan and Sir John Maundeville." *Romania* 21, no. 82 (1892): 228–39. https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.1892.5718.

Travis, Peter W. "Affective Criticism, the Pilgrimage of Reading, and Medieval English Literature." In *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, edited by Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman, 201–15. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

———. "Chaucer's Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor." In *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale*, 169–200. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

———. *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

Treharne, Elaine. *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020-1220*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Trigg, Stephanie. *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Turner, Marion. *Chaucer: A European Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

———. *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007. https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005411330.

Van Dussen, Michael. "Things." In *A New Companion to Chaucer*, 475–86. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.

Verini, Alexandra. "Medieval Models of Female Friendship in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 365–91. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.2.0365.

Walsh, P. G. "Introduction to *The Consolation of Philosophy*." In *The Consolation of Phlilosophy*, by Boethius, translated by P. G. Walsh. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Walters, Lori J. "The Book as a Gift of Wisdom: The *Chemin de lonc estude* in the Queen's Manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 4431." *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 5, no. 2 (2016): 228–46. https://doi.org/10.1353/dph.2016.0013.

Watson, Nicholas. "The Phantasmal Past: Time, History, and the Recombinative Imagination." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 1–37. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/402774.

———. "The Politics of Middle English Writing." In *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, 331–52. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

Weinstein, Jessica R. "The Sibylline Voices of Christine de Pizan." Rice University, 2006. https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/20668.

Willard, Charity Cannon. "Christine de Pizan as Teacher." *Romance Languages Annual* 3 (1991): 132–36.

———. "Christine de Pizan's *Livre Des Trois Vertus*: Feminine Ideal or Practical Advice?" In *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Diane Bornstein, 91–116. Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1981.

———. "Introduction to *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*." In *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, by Christine de Pizan, vi–xxvi. edited by Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1989.

———. "Une source oubliée du voyage imaginaire de Christine de Pizan." In *Et c'est la fin pour quoy sommes ensemble: hommage à Jean Dufournet, professeur à la Sorbonne Nouvelle: littérature, histoire et langue du Moyen Âge*, edited by Jean-Claude Aubailly, Emmanuele Baumgartner, Francis Dubost, Liliane Dulac, Marcel Faure, and René Martin, 1:321–26. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1993.

———. *Christine de Pizan : Her Life and Works*. New York: Persea Books, 1984.

Williams, Deanne. "The Dream Visions." In *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, 147–78. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Williams, Tara. "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities in the 'Canterbury Tales.'" *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 4 (2008): 383–408. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25094411.

———. *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58832.

Wisman, Josette A. "Aspects socio-économiques du *Livre des trois vertus* de Christine de Pizan." *Le moyen français* 30 (1992): 27–44. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.LMFR.3.140.

Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*. Edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015043101388.

Yeager, Stephen. "Chaucer's Prudent Poetics: Allegory, the *Tale of Melibee*, and the Frame Narrative to the *Canterbury Tales*." *The Chaucer Review* 48, no. 3 (2014): 307–21. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/chaucerrev.48.3.0307.

Zhang, Xiangyun. "Christine de Pizan: La communauté des femmes et l'ordre social." In *Au champ des escriptures: IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18-22 juillet 1998*, edited by Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, 549–60. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

Zimmermann, Margarete. "Les *Trois Vertus* de Christine de Pizan. Une lecture politique du concept de la vertu." In *Christine de Pizan: la scrittice e la città / l'écrivaine et la ville / the woman writer and the city: atti del VII Convegno internazionale "Christine de Pizan," Bologna, 22-26 settembre 2009*, 113–24. Florence: Alinea, 2013.

Zühlke, Bärbel. "Christine de Pizan—le 'moi' dans le texte et l'image." In *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, edited by Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis, 232–41. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.